

Madison Gov. Tommy Thompson tried to pressure Department of Natural Resources Secretary **George Meyer** to let the governor review proposed environmental lawsuits before they are sent to the Justice Department for prosecution, according to a letter by **Meyer** made public Wednesday.

**Meyer** said in the letter, dated March 13, and in an interview Wednesday that he had refused the request, noting that state law authorizes him to refer cases for prosecution without political review.

The DNR, the state's environmental protection agency, routinely asks the Justice Department to sue companies that have ignored or violated pollution laws.

Thompson "pushed me to run environmental referrals through him," **Meyer** said in his handwritten letter to Attorney General Jim Doyle.

**Meyer's** letter was obtained through an open records law request.

His unusually blunt remarks reflected his concern about Thompson's request in February that he and future governors name the DNR secretary, now appointed by a part-time citizen board. The governor also asked the Legislature to eliminate that panel, the state Natural Resources Board, which sets policy for the DNR.

The proposal was part of a larger plan to give the governor full "cabinet" authority to hire and fire agency heads. Thompson has argued for that power, saying the governor as chief executive is expected to make key decisions on the environment and other issues and needs to respond quickly in some cases.

In Washington, Thompson said he had not seen **Meyer's** letter to Doyle and could not comment on it. He said that "as far as I know" he had never asked **Meyer** to let him review possible environmental lawsuits.

By law, **Meyer** now answers to the Natural Resources Board, not the governor. The arrangement was set up in part as a means of insulating the DNR secretary from politics.

In his letter, **Meyer** warned that giving Thompson and future governors authority to name DNR secretaries could open the agency to political pressures.

"Having served in this job for two years, I know exactly how dangerous this would be," **Meyer** wrote.

He then described two exchanges with Thompson at a meeting shortly after the No Leg 1 ends here vember election, in which Thompson won a landslide victory to a third term.

In addition to asking **Meyer** to clear environmental prosecutions with him first, Thompson also noted **Meyer** had failed to donate money or time to his campaign, the letter said.

"The governor chewed on me for quite a while because I had not contributed to his campaign or worked for him," **Meyer** said. "I remained totally neutral."

"Both of us know what this governor's inclination would be, if he had a cabinet secretary," **Meyer** told Doyle.

Wednesday, **Meyer** declined to elaborate on his comments in the letter. But he said his concerns about politicization were raised nearly three months ago in the context of Thompson's original budget and DNR proposal.

Since then, lawmakers have modified his DNR plan to retain the Natural Resources Board, but with limited authority. The modified plan also would give the governor the power to hire and fire DNR secretaries, although agency policy would still be set by the citizen board.

**Meyer** said he was pleased with modifications to Thomp Leg 2 ends here son's original plan.

Doyle, in an interview, said **Meyer's** remarks underscored the importance of retaining the system in which the DNR secretary works for the Natural Resources Board.

"You move into a very dangerous area when you don't let the law enforcement people handle (environmental cases) strictly as law enforcement matters," Doyle said.

If Thompson got direct authority to appoint a DNR secretary, he would only name someone willing to allow him to review environmental prosecutions before they go to prosecutors, Doyle said.

He also said **Meyer's** description of the governor's political pressure underscored the danger of allowing two other Thompson changes to become law.

Thompson wants to remove the consumer protection unit from the Justice Department and merge it with a smaller unit at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. He also wants to abolish two "public intervenor" lawyers, appointed to protect the environment.

The 1995-'97 budget the state Leg 3 ends here Assembly will vote on during the week of June 19 would make both of those changes.

State Sen. Robert Cowles (R- Green Bay), chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, said any suggestion by Thompson that the governor pass judgment on environmental prosecutions "would be a violation of state law."

Cowles said **Meyer** "did the right thing" by refusing the governor's request.

He said any chiding by Thompson of **Meyer** for failing to donate to his re-election campaign "might have been a joke. Why would he need money?"

But Senate Minority Leader Robert Jauch (D-Poplar) said he took the comment seriously. He said he thought it reflected Thompson's demand for absolute loyalty from administration officials.

Demanding political donations from the DNR secretary, who is supposed to be politically independent, would be inappropriate, Jauch said.

"People of this state do not want their environmental policy for sale," he said.

#### CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Steve Schultze, 'DNR chief says governor pressed him Thompson wanted to screen cases, letter to attorney general states', *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (online), 8 Jun 1995 1 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/0EB828E6683F6998>>

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