

DNR chief says gov twisted arm

Staff and wire services

Gov. Tommy Thompson unsuccessfully sought to screen possible environmental lawsuits before they were referred for prosecution, according to Natural Resources Secretary George Meyer.

Meyer said the governor also "chewed on" him for not contributing cash or time during his re-election campaign.

In a March 13 letter to Attorney General Jim Doyle, Meyer said he refused the lawsuit-screening request. State law gives the DNR secretary the power to refer cases directly for prosecution.

Thompson pushed for the gubernatorial screening process after the November election in which he won a landslide victory.

State Sen. Robert Cowles, R-Green Bay, chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, said having a governor pass judgment on such cases "would be a violation of state law."

"If a governor carried out such a review, that would be the ultimate in politicization," Cowles said. "Obviously I don't like it."

Continued on Back Page

DNR

■ Continued from Page 1A

Meyer's letter, obtained by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, also said Thompson criticized him for not donating time and cash to the governor's re-election effort.

Meyer, a longtime DNR employee, said he remained neutral in the 1994 election campaign.

Meyer's letter is expected to renew attention to the governor's plans to revamp state government. The governor had asked the Legislature to convert DNR to a Cabinet agency.

The Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee has recommended a budget bill that includes:

■ Allowing the governor to hire and fire the DNR secretary.

■ Removing DNR area directors from the civil service.

■ Retaining the Natural Resources Board as a policy making board, but eliminating its current role of hiring and firing the DNR secretary.

Environmental groups have warned that changing the independent status of the DNR could have serious consequences for Wisconsin's environmental reputation.

The governor "pushed me to run environmental referrals through him," Meyer said in the letter.

Thompson, in Washington Wednesday, said he hadn't seen the letter and couldn't comment on it.

But he said he had never asked Meyer to allow him to review possible environmental lawsuits.

Meyer said the DNR could be opened to political pressures if the secretary were to become an appointee of the governor.