

# Timber!

## State environmental protections undermined

**T**o fully understand the demolition job being carried out on Wisconsin's environmental heritage under the new state budget, you have to go back about 40 years, when another popular Republican governor, Warren Knowles, was in office.

In 1967 Knowles formed the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources by merging the Conservation Department, which regulated hunting and fishing, with the Department of Resource Development, which regulated water quality. The merger was the idea of the Kellett Commission.

■ **Quotes and most other details on the Knowles era in this article were taken from the book "Protectors of the Land and Water: Environmentalism in Wisconsin, 1961-1968" by Thomas R. Huffman.**

The idea was that for the sake of efficiency, all environmental functions of state government should be housed in the same agency.

The merger was controversial. Hunters and members of the old conservation establishment didn't want to lose the influence they had with the Conservation Department.

Also, they had some legitimate concerns about pro-development interests in the Department of Resource Development.

State Sen. Ruben LaFavre, R-Oconto, complained: "Industry will dominate the natural resources agency. Wisconsin, which is famous for muskie and trout, will



**Joe Knight**

become a carp and sucker state."

But Knowles believed that the state needed to take a more complete approach to environmental planning and that the state could function more efficiently with a consolidated DNR.

In a compromise to ensure public input in the new agency, some Republican legislators proposed creating an independent, seven-member board, including four members of the old Conservation Commission, to set agency policy. They also proposed creating a public intervenor — an assistant attorney general — to make sure the big,

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# Meyer won't be forced out, Thompson says

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new state agency complied with state law. The public intervenor was authorized to legally intervene "for the protection of 'public rights' in water and natural resources."

Wisconsin was the first state to have an agency that combined traditional conservation functions with environmental enforcement, but other states soon followed our example.

Wisconsin programs of the 1960s for protecting wild rivers and water quality also served as models for other states and the federal government.

Under the 1966 Water Resources Act, Wisconsin became the first state to require flood plain and shoreland zoning.

Out of concern for growing public demand for outdoor recreation, Knowles expanded the Outdoor Recreation Act Plan, begun under Gov. Gaylord Nelson, to buy land for public recreation.

The state Legislature passed a modern ver-

sion of ORAP — the Stewardship Program — which went into effect in 1990. Under the 10-year program the state borrows \$25 million each year. The funds are used to purchase environmentally sensitive areas or land for outdoor recreation.

There are 12 different categories for funding. Many require a community or conservation group to provide matching funding for projects in their areas.

Warren Knowles campaigned for the program. Appropriately for an old sportsman, Knowles died while fishing in 1993 at the Governor's Fishing Opener in Black River Falls — a tradition he began in 1968.

Enough nostalgia.

The changes Gov. Tommy Thompson proposed for the DNR in his budget bill were opposed by the conservation community. The Conservation Congress, whose leaders were cozy with the governor during his first two terms, opposed killing the public intervenor's office and the policy-making function of the Natural Resources Board. They opposed making the top DNR official a political appointee.

People attending the annual spring conserva-

tion hearings voted overwhelmingly against the changes. The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation opposed the changes.

Environmental groups and sportsmen's groups, which often don't see eye to eye, found common ground in opposing DNR political changes.

But 40 years ago independent-thinking Republican legislators sided with deer hunters in a spirited public debate to make sure pro-development interests did not dominate.

This time around, Republican legislators in the Assembly made their decisions in a private caucus and then voted as a group to politicize the DNR.

The policy-making function of the Natural Resources Board was retained — the governor had wanted to make it advisory only. But the governor will be in charge of hiring and firing the DNR secretary, so the board won't really have any teeth to ensure its policies are carried out.

Once the governor signs the budget, he will have the authority to appoint the district directors — positions that, at least until now, have been held by career resource managers —

foresters, wildlife managers and others who have come up through the ranks.

The public intervenor essentially will cease to exist once the governor signs the budget. There will be a state attorney in the DNR called the "public intervenor" but the intervenor no longer will play a watchdog role over state agencies or be allowed to sue.

What will happen to the DNR remains to be seen. Thompson or future governors effectively can trash the agency by appointing political hacks to the top positions. The governor has said he would not replace George Meyer, the current DNR secretary who is popular and well-qualified, but who conspicuously did not contribute to the governor's re-election campaign.

The new budget will open the door for raids on the Stewardship Fund. Shoreland zoning will be left to the counties, with no DNR oversight, which means anything goes in most of the state.

The damage to the DNR doesn't have to be permanent. The time to begin fixing it is the next election.

Leader-Telegram staff