Timber!
State environmental protections undermined

To 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.

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

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 created with new law. The public interest was authorized to legally intervene for the protection of ‘public uses’ 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 floodplain and shortened zoning.

Out of concern for growing public demand for outdoor recreation, Knowles expanded the Outdoor Recreation Act to include streamside lands and conservation areas.

Thompson Thompson proposed for the DNR in his budget bill were opposed by the conservancy community. The Conservancy, Congress, where leaders were cozy with the governor during his first two terms, opposed killing the public interest’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 conservation hearings voted overwhelmingly against the changes. The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation opposed the changes.

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

4 years ago independent-thinking Republican legislator sided with hunters in a power struggle over pro-development interests did not dominate.

This year around, Republican legislators in the Assembly made their decisions in a private caucus and then voted as a group to eliminate 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 secretory, 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 interest essentially will cease to exist once the governor signs the budget. There will be a state attorney in the DNR called the ‘public interest’ 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. At least some governors effectively can look the agency in the eye and say political help to the tune of millions of dollars that has said he would not replace George Meyer, the current DNR secretary who is popular and well-qualified, but who couldn’t find a seat on the governor’s election campaign.

The new budget will open the door for raids on the Stewardship Fund. Stewardship money 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.

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