

Local Pressure, Statewide Effect?

Wisconsin conservation groups target Doyle veto of AB138

By Dick Ellis

Local pressure, statewide effect? That's what sportsmen's groups across Wisconsin are hoping to accomplish in concerted but regional efforts to override Governor Jim Doyle's veto of AB 138. The Bill would have restored the appointment authority of the DNR Secretary back to the Natural Resources Board and away from the Governor.

In mid December, the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, the state's largest conservation organization representing 168 hunting, fishing, trapping and forestry-related groups, and more than 100,000 members, unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the Wisconsin Assembly and Senate to override Doyle's veto of Assembly Bill 138. That resolution reflected the sentiments of Wisconsin sportsmen and women that overwhelmingly favor of going back to the system that placed more emphasis on the Secretary position requiring extensive natural resources experience.

AB138 would have restored a process of appointing the secretary that has historical roots to 1928, when Wisconsin passed legislation that the six-citizen Conservation Commission (WCC) would appoint a Natural Resources professional to head the then Wisconsin Conservation Department. The system remained in place for the WCC and its successor, the Department of Natural Resources until 1995, when Governor Tommy Thompson made the Secretary a political appointee of the Governor.

"Secretaries' under the new system have had little or no background in Natural Resources," said Jack Nissen, WWF President. "However I do believe that the secretaries that have been appointed since that time have been appointed because the respective Governors felt these appointees had other leadership qualities they thought the agency was lacking in. I have always had a great respect for these indi-

viduals for the qualities they brought to the agency, but at the same time believed they lacked the most important qualification to run the agency; a background in natural resources."

Nissen was one of about 10 representatives of the Watertown Conservation Club, Dousman Rod & Gun Club and the WWA who invited Wisconsin State Legislature Representative Joel Kleefisch, 38th



Reflecting meetings being held throughout Wisconsin and wide-ranging displeasure statewide on Governor Doyle's veto of AB138 that would place the power to appoint the DNR Secretary in the hands of the Natural Resources Board instead of the Governor, members of the Watertown Conservation Club, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and Dousman Rod & Gun Club asked Wisconsin State Legislature Representative Joel Kleefisch of the 38th Assembly District for his vote to help override the Doyle veto last week. (Ellis)



Assembly District Republican to the Wauertown Conservation Club Thursday night, February 4 in an effort to persuade Kleefisch to vote to override the Doyle veto. A vote is expected sometime in late February. In Jefferson County last week, Kleefisch said that his mind is not yet made up, but that he has always voted his conscience on any issue without regard to constituent pressure. Kleefisch did say the issue was a priority, and that the DNR is the number one agency he fights against and receives the most complaints about specific to “taking away people’s rights”.

WWF District 8 Director John Wagner told Kleefisch that “politicians at the capitol aren’t getting it.” Last year on July 28th at the Public Hearing sportsmen and women turned out from throughout the state to strongly support the Bill. 173 individuals representing more than 40 conservations and environmental organizations testified or registered in favor of this Bill. This is overwhelming support for the Bill, but only a small representation of the outdoorsmen and women strongly in favor of this Bill, Joel (Kleefisch) talked about voting his conscience and a smarter Bill. Joel and others at the Capitol need to listen to the people of Wisconsin and override the veto and then make their modifications to the Bill.”

According to Nissen, George Meyer was the first Governor appointed DNR Secretary, an appointment that went largely unnoticed, he believes, due to the

fact that Meyer “had a great background in natural resources and was already running the agency” (as an appointee of the Natural Resources Board). Since that time, he said, sportsmen and women have been asked a minimum of four times at the Conservation Congress spring hearings who they want to appoint the DNR secretary.

“The results have been an overwhelming eight or nine-to-one ratio to restore the appointment to the Natural Resources Board,” said Nissen. “I have never seen an issue that has so much support behind it. This issue is the hottest issue across the state right now. We are so close to finally getting this thing done. Our legislators need to start listening to the sportsmen and women on this issue and vote to override.”

“Sporting clubs all across the state have been attempting to hold these types of meetings in an attempt to convince members of the Assembly to vote with sportsmen and women on this issue and vote to override the Governor. It is important for Assemblyman Kleefisch to understand that sportsmen and women feel very passionate about this vote, and they want their legislators to understand that not only do want the veto overridden, they want to know that their representatives are listening to them.”

In this time of increasing distrust for federal lawmakers, several attendees at the meeting also said that the Secretary posi-

tion was not only too political and as such not in the best interests of the natural resources and state sportsmen and women, but that local politicians too need to be more accountable. Doyle, was Wisconsin’s Attorney general when the Secretary appointment change was made from the Natural Resources Board to the Governor and at the time called the change a wholesale attack on Wisconsin’s natural resources. Doyle, Nissen said, promised during two campaigns for office that if a bill restoring the authority to appoint the DNR secretary to the Natural Resources Board ever made its way to his desk, as Governor he would sign it into law.

“It’s extremely disappointing to have had the Governor break his promise to sportsmen and women of this state but now we must demand that our elected officials stand with us and vote to override,” Nissen said. “It has been a long 14 years trying to get this appointment back in the hands of the Natural Resources Board. I have heard all the reasons why some legislators do not think they can support this bill or why they cannot vote to override the Governor. I am thankful for the legislators voting in support and disappointed in the fact that some of our legislators are not listening to the sportsmen and women of this state. We as voters expect our elected officials to exercise their own judgment on many issues, but when we as sportsmen and women speak out, we expect them to do the job they were elected to do and that is the will of the people. And the will of the people in this case is to override the Governor.”

“Never before has an issue had more support, historic numbers of sponsors and co-sponsors signing onto a bill, and great bi-partisan support. It’s time to take as much politics out of the DNR as possible. It has been said by some that this has become the most political issue this session besides the budget. Well it might be that the only thing that truly stands in the way of doing what is right for our Natural Resources is the politics of trying to stop it from happening. I will guarantee that sportsmen will be watching how their representatives vote on this override attempt.”

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