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With the Dick Ellis Experts

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## Will Governor or NRB Appoint DNR Secretary? *Crucial public hearing set for July 28*

By Dick Ellis

A public hearing that will play a crucial role in determining whether the appointment of DNR Secretary remains a responsibility of the Governor of Wisconsin or is restored as a responsibility of the Natural Resources Board (NRB) will be held July 28 in Madison. Wisconsin Wildlife Federation (WWF) Executive Director George Meyer, calling Bill AB 138 “critically important”, offered an historical perspective of the DNR Secretary position in an interview Sunday and provided reasons why state sportsmen and women strongly support restoration authority of the position to the NRB.

Meyer worked for the DNR for 32 years and served as Secretary from 1993 to 2001. He was appointed to the position by the NRB in 1993 and reappointed by Governor Tommy Thompson in 1995 and 1999. After retiring from the DNR in 2002, Meyer was a visiting professor at Lawrence University for two years before accepting his current position as Executive Direc-



*Public attendance or input is encouraged for a Public Hearing in Madison July 28 focusing on whether the Governor of Natural Resources Board will appoint future DNR Secretaries.*

tor of the WWF in 2003.

Meyer said July 12 that the predecessor of the Wisconsin DNR was the Conservation Department. In 1928, at the strong urging of sportsmen and women of the state including Aldo Leopold, the legislature gave the responsibility of the appointment of Conservation Department Director to the Citizen Conserva-

tion Commission, the predecessor to the seven-citizen NRB. Prior to that, the Director was the Governor’s appointee which, Mayer said, led to a high involvement of political interference in conservation decision-making.

The Board-appointed system remained until 1995, when Governor Thompson inserted in the

state budget a provision making the Secretary of the DNR and other high level agency staff political appointees of the Governor. Meyer offered several reasons why sportsmen and women “strongly support” restoration of the appointment authority to the NRB.

“With a Board appointed authority you have greater continuity of senior management experience in natural resources management,” he said. “As an example, from 1954 until 2001, a total of 47 years, there were four agency heads to the Conservation Department and the DNR, (which was from the Conservation Department in 1968). Under the Governor appointed situation, there have been three Secretaries appointed. Under this system you end up with a high rotation of leadership inexperienced in conservation. Staff has to continually educate the agency leadership about the many and complex issues the agency deals with.”

Meyer said the system does not demand that Secretary ap-





*Is DNR Secretary appointments made by Wisconsin governors too politically motivated and not in the best interest of state sportsmen and women? Former DNR Secretary George Meyer (above) says, absolutely. George Meyer is pictured during a recent pheasant hunt with daughter, Jocelyn and canine friend, Cody.*

pointments have significant natural resource agency management background. As examples, he said, the last two Secretaries and their Deputies had “zero days of natural resource agency management experience.” “The top positions at the DNR should not be used for on-the-job training experience,” he said. “Also, these folks tend not to have any hunting background. The top 10 DNR staff are political appointees, only one of the 10 hunts and the person is the Administrator of the Air and Waste Division which has no responsibility of any conservation programs.”

“There is constant Governor’s Office involvement in the day-to-day conservation decisions of the agency. Those involved in the Governor’s Office have no conservation background. These are clearly political decisions. The agency staff from top to bottom readily attests to this involvement by the

Governor’s Office in agency decision making. This is exactly what was happening before 1928.”

Meyer said that Assembly Bill (AB) 138 has 68 cosponsors, including a majority of the Assembly and a majority of the Senate. Passage of the measure, he said, will require very strong support from the Assembly Natural Resources Committee, the full Assembly, the Senate Natural Resources Committee and the full Senate. He said that AB 138 needs to land on Governor Doyle’s desk with a two-thirds majority in both houses as a margin to override a potential veto. According to Meyer, Doyle is expressing reluctance about signing the bill.

“In 2009 for the first time the Governor has expressed reluctance in signing the Bill,” Meyer said. “This is contrary to the promises he made when he ran for office in 2002 and 2006. He has repeated those promises

several times before conservation groups including repeatedly before the Conservation Congress, during his term in office. He was Attorney General in 1995 and opposed the change to a Governor’s appointed Secretary at that time.”

Meyer said that a Bill has been introduced in the legislature to restore the appointment authority to the NRB every legislature since 1995. In the last session there were 42 cosponsors of the Bill restoring the appointment authority. The Bill passed the Senate 21-12 and then passed the Assembly Natural Resources Committee 13-1. It was prevented from coming to the floor of the assembly by the then-speaker Michael Huebsch, even though he was a cosponsor of the Bill, Meyer said, due to the requests of several business groups.

“We had counted 73 out of 99 Assembly members committed to voting for the Bill,”

Meyer said. “The Conservation Congress Spring Hearings have voted in favor of the Bill numerous times by a nine-to-one ratio. The delegates of the Conservation Congress voted for the measure by a unanimous floor vote this May. We need every sportsman and woman that can to show up at the public hearing on July 28th. For those that cannot, they should contact their state representative. It is so important that every area of Wisconsin be represented so that committee members from throughout the state know that this is important to the voters in their legislative districts.”

The Public Hearing on AB 138 will be held Tuesday, July 28th at 11:00 a.m. in room 417 North at the State Capitol. For those unable to attend, contact your state representative by calling the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-362-9472. Leave a message for your state representative and senator. *OWO*



*Despite overwhelming support by Wisconsin sportsmen and women to restore the appointment of the DNR Secretary position to the Natural Resources Board, the appointment has remained a responsibility of the Governor. That could change with a Public Hearing scheduled in Madison for July 28th.*