

Joint Finance Committee Ambushes Outdoor Community

Knowles-Nelson provision seeks to exclude hunters, anglers, trappers from lands bought with Stewardship grants

By Dick Ellis

The Legislature's Joint Finance Committee (JFC), lacking the integrity to embrace open debate imperative to fairly representing the interests of the people of Wisconsin, delivered a potentially devastating blow to the sportsmen and women of this state in the wee hours May 29. With the last item on the agenda buried among approximately 20 other items labeled Odds & Ends by WisPolitics.com, the committee at 5:30 a.m. inserted a provision into the current state budget which takes away access rights on thousands of acres of lands purchased with Stewardship grants in Wisconsin for hunting, fishing and trapping.

The Joint Finance Committee is Co-Chaired by Senator Mark Miller (D-Monona) and Assembly member, Mark Pocan (D-Madison). On May 5th, the JFC, the same committee that four years ago raided the state trout, turkey and waterfowl stamp accounts, also voted to eliminate the requirement that DNR publish a directory of Stewardship funded lands that would have listed all properties open to hunting, trapping and fishing.

In preparation of the last state budget in 2007, Wisconsin sportsmen and women worked diligently to reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, a state bonding program, for another 10 years with the funds to be used to purchase land for

wildlife, fisheries, forest, parks and natural areas. That work by Wisconsin sportsmen and women was critical to the stewardship fund gaining reauthorization. A key provision fought for in the Stewardship reauthorization was that land purchased with stewardship funds would be open for hunting, fishing, and trapping except in limited circumstances, for example, if public safety was at issue. The Natural Resources Board would have been the governing voice determining if any acreage was inappropriate for use by state sportsmen and women.

Last Friday, however, without public hearing on the amendment and without input from hunters, anglers and trappers, the JFC inserted a paragraph in the state budget bill stating that the DNR does not have to require public access for hunting, fishing and trapping on lands purchased with Stewardship Funds by local units of government and non-profit organizations. If enacted into law as early as this week or next, the amendment will keep sportsmen off literally thousands of acres of land.

This columnist and numerous other Wisconsin outdoor media professionals were bombarded from wildlife organizations and concerned individuals with calls for assistance in publicly spotlighting this issue in all haste. A joint media release issued June 3 by



On a last agenda item taken up at 5:30 am May 29 without input from Wisconsin sportsmen and women, the Joint Finance Committee added a provision to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program that would not require lands acquired through grants be open to access and use by hunters, anglers and trappers

the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association and the Wisconsin Conservation Congress representing 169 hunting, fishing and trapping groups and hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin sportsmen and women voiced grave concern for the amendment and stated their unity in requesting that the Wisconsin Legislature remove the stewardship amendment to the state budget.

“Sportsmen and women worked hard in the 2007-2009 budget process to extend the Stewardship Fund for the years 2010-2020 at \$86 million a year,” the release states. “Our organizations have been part of a year-long rule-making process including other conservation organizations, local units of government, and land trusts established by the DNR to implement the public access requirements of the Stewardship fund. DNR is proposing to bring the public access rules to the Natural Resources Board at its June meeting. The budget amendment adopted by the JFC eliminates the whole public involvement process.”

In a media release issued June 5, defending his introduction of the provision, JFC Co-Chairman Mark Miller states that keeping natural areas open to the public is just as important in urban areas as rural areas. He said he introduced the provision to restore the grant program to its traditional role as a resource for all areas of the state, rural and urban.

He states that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has two elements. The primary element consists of properties under the direct control of the state, accounting for approximately 80 percent of the dollar value and 88 percent of the total stewardship acreage. These areas, according to the release,



Breaking a two year old agreement with Wisconsin's outdoor community that had worked diligently to secure an extension to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund for acquiring lands in Wisconsin, the Joint Finance Committee in the wee hours May 29 added a provision that would exclude those sporting groups from accessing much of those properties



Wisconsin trappers, hunters and anglers would be excluded from access to thousands of acres of lands purchased through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund under action taken by the Joint Finance Committee in the wee hours May 29.

are not affected by the Miller amendment and remain open to the full range of outdoor recreational activities. The second part is the grant program which has leveraged over \$190 million in local, private, and federal funds to acquire recreational areas for public use. Only the grant program is affected by the Miller amendment, the release

states.

“Seventy-five percent of the lands purchased through the Grant program are open to hunting, fishing and hiking,” Miller said. “The remaining lands are areas where activities like hunting and trapping are inappropriate because the properties are in urbanized areas or small or contain environmentally sensitive

species.

In phone conversations with Miller and Poca aides Friday and followed up with e-mails, this columnist requested answers to the following questions: “Specific to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, why was the vote by the Joint Finance Committee last Friday on the provision to restrict hunter, angler, and trapper access on thousands of acres of Wisconsin lands taken at 5:30 a.m. without public debate or sportsmen’s input? Why was the provision offered as the final ‘odds and ends’ vote of the evening within approximately 20 other unrelated topics?” As of deadline time Monday morning those requests had not been answered.

Representative Jerry Petrowski of Wisconsin’s 86th Assembly District (R-Marathon) and other lawmakers stressed that the Budget committee had reneged on a two-year old agreement. He said by inserting the provision in the middle of the night the Finance Committee had demonstrated the “worst kind of governance.”

“When we reauthorized the program in the last budget, we worked to make sure these publicly purchased lands would be opened to sportsmen,” he said. “It is outrageous that Wisconsin taxpayers would spend millions of dollars every year for the purchase of land and then be shut out when they want to enjoy that same land.”

Onalaska resident and Wisconsin hunter Sandy Heidel works as a watchdog of state government to ensure that the rights of state sportsmen and women are protected. In providing background for this column, Heidel said June 5 in interviews and e-mail correspondence that sportsmen and women have always supported the stewardship

program, but more and more lands funded with stewardship grants were being closed to hunting, trapping and fishing. Because of that alarming trend, changes to the 07 through 09 budget protecting sportsmen access were negotiated on a bi-partisan basis and included all sides of the discussion.

According to Heidel, the JFC provision was responding to an effort on the part of Stewardship grant recipients to protect their own private interests and restrict the public's use of these publicly funded lands. "These non profit organizations have decided for years what public uses they would allow and prohibit, and DNR allowed them to make these decisions," Heidel said. "Increasingly taxpayers funded the purchase of land and watched as hunting and trapping and even fishing on these lands was restricted and prohibited."

She said sportsmen and women asked for a way for the public and elected officials to weigh in on and write rules

whereby all access would be allowed unless for example safety and resource protection were at issue, and requested that the Natural Resources Board be the decision making body that had final say on whether lands

would be open or closed to hunting, fishing and trapping; not the non-profit boards of the grant recipients.

"How can some groups be allowed to circumvent this process and change the law to eliminate these access opportunities," Heidel asked. "The bottom line is that we wanted the public to have a say in how our publicly funded lands are being managed."

Heidel also drew an analogy between the land access issue and a child care center receiving federal or state funding which then requires them to operate within certain guidelines set by the government agency. For instance, when admitting children the center cannot discriminate against any particular race or religion.

"Private non-profits are used to having specific parameters that accompany any government or private foundation grant," she said. "This is nothing new. So when the state established that access opportunities need to be provided in order to receive a

Stewardship grant this is nothing out of the ordinary. The state should be able and I think expected to set clear criteria that benefit the taxpayers and provide access to these lands."

In addition to Miller and Pocan, the Joint Finance Committee is also represented by five democratic and two republican senators, and five democrat and two republican assembly members. They include Democratic Senators Dave Hansen; Green Bay, Julie Lassa; Stevens Point, John Lehman; Racine, Judy Robson; Beloit and Lena Taylor; Milwaukee, and Republicans Alberta Darling; River Hills and Luther Olsen; Ripon.

Assembly representatives include Democrats Pedro Colon and Tamara Grigsby; Milwaukee, Cory Mason; Racine, Gary Sherman; Port Wing and Jennifer Shilling; Lacrosse and Republicans Robin Voss; Caledonia and Phil Montgomery; Ash-
waubenon.

All democrats and Republicans Voss and Montgomery supported the provision. *W*

RESPOND NOW

The bill must still pass the full state assembly and State Senate. To voice your opinion, call or e-mail the following people:

Assembly speaker Mike Sheridan: Rep.sheridan@legis.wisconsin.gov 608-266-7503

Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker: Sen.decker@legis.wisconsin.gov 608-266-2502

To email your state representative and your state senator, use the above email address for Decker and Sheridan but replace the name decker in the e-mail address with your senator's last name and the name Sheridan with your representative's last name. If you do not know your legislator's last name, connect with the Legislature's web page: www.legis.state.wi.us or call the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-362-9472 and leave a message for both your senator and representative.

If you are a Wisconsin hunter, angler or trapper, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Wisconsin Waterfowl Association and Wisconsin Conservation Congress are recommending the following message: "I am strongly opposed to the stewardship amendments that were placed in the budget Bill. I want you to vote to take all stewardship amendments out of the state budget. Leave the stewardship fund alone."



Although funds raised privately and through sportsmen's licensing pays a tremendous amount of land purchases in Wisconsin and habitat improvement for wildlife, like this project to improve habitat for sauger on the Winnebago system by sportsmen's clubs, the Joint Finance Committee with action taken as a last item agenda at 5:30 a.m. May 29 would exclude hunters, anglers and trappers from accessing property purchased through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program.