

PRESS RELEASE

March 11, 2002

For Further Information contact:

Caryl Terrell, Sierra Club, 608-256-0565
Dave Cieslewicz, 1000 Friends, 608-259-1000
Rob Kennedy, CBE, 608-251-9164
Kerry Schumann, WISPIRG, 608-251-1918
John Schwarzmann, ECCOLA, 715-356-4206

**Conservation of Land and Water Hit Hard by
Assembly Republican Cuts That Don't Solve the Budget Crunch**

Madison, WI: Conservation and environmental groups criticized the cuts to conservation programs in Saturday Budget Repair work product of the Assembly Republican Caucus.

"The Saturday Assembly Republican Caucus was a free for all attack on Wisconsin's conservation heritage, not the serious work needed to solve the Budget Crunch," said Caryl Terrell, Legislative Director of the statewide John Muir chapter of the Sierra Club.

"Environmental and conservation groups ask legislators to reject the cut of almost 50% in the Stewardship Fund, elimination of the Recycling Program, cuts in staff for water resource protection, cuts in enforcement investigation at the Department of Justice, elimination of the regional planning commission for the fastest growing county, and excessive restrictions on accepting federal funds for high speed rail," said Terrell. "Attacking our life support systems-- clean air, clean water and safe waste disposal--and reducing our quality of life is penny wise and dollar foolish. Can the Republican co-chair of Joint Finance, Rep. John Gard, be serious? He just raided the Stewardship Fund for a huge purchase in his own district but now cuts off equally legitimate land purchases in 98 other Assembly districts."

"These cuts are completely unnecessary. They don't help solve the budget crisis, but they do seriously undermine important environmental programs for no apparent reason," said Barry Ashenfelter, Executive Director of the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters, Watertown.

"The Legislature must stop hiding policy issues in State Budget bills," said Terrell. "The overwhelming number of motions made this past Saturday were free-standing policy bills stalled in legislative committees. Any bill that can't get out of committee after fifteen months of session does not deserve a free ride in the Budget."

"The public is horrified at the slimy deals involved in the budget process," continued Terrell. "Five citizen groups were successful in getting the circuit court to reject the 1999 State Budget amendment for Ashley Furniture Industries. We say enough is enough. Focus on balancing the budget and good fiscal management of the ship of state."

"We are concerned that the Assembly Republican Caucus is promoting these terrible policy items," said John Schwarzmann, of ECCOLA in Minocqua. "We call on the Senate to change the budget repair bill to include Green Scissors type projects that save money and help the

environment. A great example is cutting needless road projects like the Hwy J/164 widening in Washington County."

"Cutting conservation Stewardship funds will hurt local governments with another excessive state cutback," said Dane County Supervisor Brett Hulsey, a co-author of the Dane County Conservation Fund referendum. "Three fourths of Dane County voters supported increasing funding for this program. It saves open space, saves money, and is the best thing we can do to protect our parks and slow irresponsible sprawl."

Studies from Dane County and across the country show that protecting open space saves tax money, because sprawl development costs taxpayers three times more. - Source American Farmland Trust, www.farmland.org

"Here in the Northwoods, we know that Wisconsin can't afford to lose a single penny of Stewardship Funds," continued Schwarzmann. "Right now the DNR is working with several large firms to protect over 100,000 acres of land from development in Oneida, Lincoln, Langlade, Vilas and Iron Counties with conservation easements. These easements will protect wildlife habitat, trails and forestry only if enough Stewardship Funds are available to match federal Forest Legacy dollars. The Assembly Republican Caucus' warped priorities have the potential to lose federal dollars and derail easements that are vital to the Northwoods economy and environment."

According the AP Wire Service, the Assembly Republican Caucus voted to cut the amount of money the state can borrow to buy land for conservation by \$300 million, limiting the borrowing to \$372 million over 10 years. Of that amount, \$35 million would be available each year. The State currently can spend \$46 million from the Stewardship Fund on conservation. The reduction in borrowing would save the state \$500,000 in 2002-03.

"Since Wisconsin's recycling law was implemented in 1990, Wisconsin residents have recycled 40 percent of their trash, keeping that waste out of landfills and allowing us to avoid building new polluting landfills," said Kerry Schumann, WISPIRG Director. "Eliminating Wisconsin's mandatory recycling program opens the door for more landfills. More landfills mean one thing - more pollutants like cyanide, mercury, dioxins and lead getting into our air and drinking water supplies."

The slippery slope just became a waterfall," said Todd Ambs, Executive Director of the River Alliance of Wisconsin. "We simply cannot expect to protect water, our most valuable natural resource, when we continue to give the DNR more responsibility but less resources to do the job."

"Slashing more than 7 positions (6.5 water integration team members and 1 water attorney) on top of the devastating cuts already made in the full Joint Finance Committee weakens DNR's water programs," said Terrell. "Will these cuts jeopardize Secretary Bazzell's mini-reorganization of DNR's forestry division? He has promised to assign staff to fully integrate water issues with forestry and wildlife management. Maybe he cannot do that now."

"The public expects government to provide a level playing field for all companies and enforce the laws on the books. It is particularly troubling to see the Rep. Assembly caucus undercut our clean air and water, hazardous and solid waste laws by axing dollars for the Department of Justice's investigation and prosecution for virtually all environmental enforcement programs."

Motion #334 reads: "Delete the Department of Justice's investigation and prosecution appropriation and provide that DOJ no longer be credited 10% of all moneys received for the

expenses of investigation and prosecution of violations, including attorneys fees, under the following statutes: (a) medical assistance; (b) marketing; trade practices; (c) trusts and monopolies; (d) water and sewage; (e) pollution discharge elimination; (f) solid waste facilities; (g) remedial action; (metallic mining; (i) nonmetallic mining reclamation; and (j) general environmental provisions.”

"Assembly Republicans are trying to shackle the Governor's ability to get federal funding for high speed rail, to subvert environmental laws by dictating the outcome of planning for Southeast Wisconsin freeways, and effectively end planning for the state's second largest urban area, Dane County," said Rob Kennedy, representing Citizens for a Better Environment. "We ask the Senate to instead support transportation choice and local and state environmental planning. Moreover, investments for the Marquette Interchange and other highways should use "life cycle costing" and be part of the state's regular rehabilitation and major project programs."

“The legislature needs to downsize the Department of Transportation and subject all road and bridge projects to a life-cycle cost analysis,” said Terrell. “Projects such as the Ackerville Bridge/Lovers Lane Reconstruction Project and the proposed four-lane expansion of Highway 164 are unnecessary and waste approximately \$100 million tax dollars. Other more effective and less costly alternatives are readily available to improve traffic safety on Highway 164, and these citizen-supported alternatives should be immediately implemented.

According to this year's state government statistics, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation now has an enormous \$4.4 billion roadbuilding budget and is staffed with nearly 4,000 employees statewide.

The groups promised to continue to watchdog the budget process and inform the public and their membership about further budget mischief under the Capitol Dome.

END