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Editorial: Sen. Darling versus nature

An editorial
June 10, 2003

Responding to complaints from conservation groups about her efforts to slash \$17 million in funding for the Department of Natural Resources, Joint Finance Committee Co-chair Alberta Darling sought to portray herself as the champion of taxpayers in an imagined battle with public employees.



"This is going to be a taxpayers' budget, not a bureaucrats' budget," the Republican state senator from the swank Milwaukee suburb of River Hills claimed. She suggested the DNR could stand deep cuts because "they have so many people in bureaucratic positions." Of course, no one who knows anything about the DNR or what it does agrees with Darling. DNR Secretary Scott Hassett says Darling's slash-and-burn budget plan would, if implemented, be "devastating" for hunters, anglers, hikers, campers, birdwatchers and everyone else who cherishes the out-of-doors. Sierra Club in Wisconsin Director Caryl Terrell says Darling's scheme "is probably the worst budget as far as impacting the DNR that we've ever seen in Wisconsin."

Hassett and Terrell are not exaggerating.

Darling and her allies on the Joint Finance Committee are proposing an assault on the DNR's ability to function that would:

Close half of the DNR's service centers around the state and limit the hours for remaining centers.

Stop the stocking of northern pike in Wisconsin lakes and reduce the stocking of trout, muskie and walleye by 15 percent.

Reduce the stocking of pheasant in public hunting grounds by 75 percent.

Eliminate 27 fisheries biologist and 11 wildlife biologist positions.

Eliminate as many as 32 warden positions.

That final cut would, if implemented, leave Wisconsin at the bottom of all states in the ratio of wardens to people who trap, fish and hunt.

"There's going to be less wardens in the field - less deterrence," says Randy Stark,

the DNR's chief warden. The Wisconsin Conservation Congress, the Wisconsin Outdoors Alliance and the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation don't see these wardens and biologists as "bureaucrats" but rather as defenders of the out-of-doors that millions of Wisconsinites treasure.

Our bet is that a lot of those people are taxpayers who live in Milwaukee suburbs, even in River Falls. Darling's attempt to stir a "taxpayers versus bureaucrats" fight assumes that these two groups should be at odds with one another. That's a bad assumption, as bad as the assumption that the DNR can absorb these cuts and still do its job.

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