

Senate Budget Bill Gets a “C” For Conservation

(Watertown) The State Senate budget bill was headed for high marks on natural resource protection matters until a potentially expansive wetlands destruction amendment got included at the last minute, according to the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters.

“A little midnight dumping occurred in the Senate,” said Barry Ashenfelter, executive director of WLCV. “They were on their way to a good grade and then the bottom fell out.” The “bottom”, according to Ashenfelter, was a late change made on the Senate floor (for the benefit of Ashley Furniture Co.) that gives the governor authority to fill specific wetlands. A quick stroke of the veto pen could expand the governor’s power to every wetland in the state.

“Proponents of the wetland wrecker provision are wrong to pit jobs against the environment. That’s a fairy-tale fib. In a state where ‘green and gold’ are practically sacred colors voters are smart enough to know that the economy and ecology go hand in hand,” Ashenfelter said.

Highlights of the Senate bill include restoring \$22 million for energy conservation, increasing funding for Smart Growth planning, maintaining \$60 million annually for Stewardship Fund land purchases, banning the sale of mercury thermometers, reinstating funding for UW-Extension's recycling education and solid waste research programs, exempting the PSC from the hiring freeze for currently vacant environmental review positions, campaign finance reform, and others.

Along with the wetlands filling provision, another lowlight gives large commercial and industrial energy users a big break on their public benefits payments. Also in question is the potential impact to the state’s nonpoint source pollution prevention program by a provision that eliminates DATCP’s Land and Water Resources Bureau and reassigns its responsibilities to other agencies. Further, funding was eliminated for a wildlife rehabilitation facility, full forestry funding was not restored, and several water quality positions are eliminated.

The League will be producing a Conservation Scorecard this summer, rating and ranking all legislators individually on their commitment to conservation. The League will also get involved in several legislative campaigns around the state.

“We’re trying to build a little political muscle for the conservation community of Wisconsin,” said Ashenfelter. “One way to do that is by letting voters know where candidates stand on conservation. Clean air and healthy water are important to voters in the Badger State. We will let people know who the true champions of conservation are.”