

PRESS RELEASE

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**Conservation and Environmental Leaders Call on Governor to Veto Wetland Exemption and Hidden \$5.5 Billion Tax Increase from Budget Repair Bill**

Madison WI: Conservation and environmental leaders called on Governor Scott McCallum to veto the wetland exemption for Ashley Furniture Industries, Inc. and the mandate for overbuilding freeways in southeast Wisconsin. The Budget Repair bill cleared both houses of the State Legislature on Monday, after more than 160 days of deliberation, and will soon be on the Governor's desk.

"Today we are delivering a letter to Governor McCallum signed by fifteen conservation and environmental groups," said Caryl Terrell, Wisconsin Sierra Club spokesperson. "Governor McCallum, we remind you of your pledge in 2001 to protect our state's wetlands and your oath of office to uphold Wisconsin's laws and the State Constitution."

"The question here is a simple one. Are we going to uphold the constitution and conduct the business of government in the light of day or are we going to continue to send a message that the budget has become a giant Christmas tree under which presents are wrapped for whatever special interest makes the biggest campaign contributions?" said Todd Ambs, Executive Director of the River Alliance of Wisconsin.

"Since the CEO of Ashley Furniture, Ron Wanek, has indicated in a recent letter to the Governor that Ashley will NOT be requesting the exemption, then there is absolutely no reason for this outrageous non-fiscal special favor to be included in the budget bill," said Charlie Luthin, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Wetlands Association. "The Governor should remove the exemption provision to keep our budget process clean of non-fiscal policy."

"Wetlands, groundwater, lakes, and rivers are all part of an interconnected system that citizens consider Wisconsin's priceless water treasures. This terrible precedent of legislating exemptions from environmental laws without public comment is a recipe for disaster," said Donna Sefton, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Association of Lakes.

"This is an issue that has implications far beyond the protection of one wetland. It sets a dangerous precedent of special interests skirting the law. This is an obvious example of the Legislature handing favors to special interests. It's up to Governor McCallum to uphold existing law rather than handing a special interest exemption to Ashley Furniture," said Kerry Schumann, spokesperson for WISPIRG.

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“The Governor should veto this entire provision to protect wetlands in the Mississippi watershed that provide valuable floodwater absorbing capacity. The Trempealeau River is very prone to flooding. Arcadia and downstream residents regularly have to deal with flooded basements and in recent years the sewers backed up and collapsed due to floodwaters. The city has applied for considerable funding for flood relief projects in recent years. This wetland exemption does not make sense fiscally or for a flood prevention perspective,” said Terrell.

Wisconsin has about 5.3 million acres of wetland left from the 10 million acres that once covered our state. These remaining wetlands are critical for fish and wildlife habitat, they reduce flooding, they improve water quality, and they provide scenic beauty and recreation for boaters, hunters, anglers, wildlife watchers and others. Wisconsin has one of the strongest wetlands protection laws in the nation yet we continue to lose this valuable resource.

The Budget repair bill also includes a hidden tax increase. The Sierra Club displayed a large check in the amount of \$5.5 Billion made out to Developers and Roadbuilders from the taxpayers of the State of Wisconsin.

"Putting a \$5.5 billion tax increase in the bill for paving Southeast Wisconsin is the largest proposed tax increase in Wisconsin state history," said Dane County Supervisor Brett Hulseby. "It will mean that our streets and roads in Dane County will go wanting, the State will have to raise the gas tax to pay for it, and there will be no money left for high speed or commuter trains in Dane County. Governor McCallum should keep his promise and veto this sneaky tax increase."

“This mandate to expand Milwaukee’s freeways rolls over local communities, takes values from the city and will lead to more suburban sprawl,” said Dave Cieslewicz, Executive Director for 1000 Friends of Wisconsin.

Recent studies show that new highway and lanes fill with traffic in 3-5 years. Similar mandates in previous State Budgets have been vetoed at the request of environmentalists and the Department of Transportation.