



March 27, 2015

To: Joint Committee on Finance

Re: Comments on proposed state budget, Assembly Bill 21/Senate Bill 21

Wisconsin has been a leader in conserving natural resources, with examples ranging from the work of Aldo Leopold to the programs of past political leaders, such as Warren Knowles and Gaylord Nelson. The proposed state budget cuts for 2015-2017 devalue this history of land preservation and democratic decision making about wildlife management in Wisconsin. We simply need to do better regarding the legacy we leave for future generations of Wisconsin citizens.

The Wisconsin Society of Ornithology is a volunteer, nonprofit organization that was established in 1939. Our mission is to promote the enjoyment, study and conservation of Wisconsin's birds. We believe these budget cuts will have a direct and negative effect on bird populations in Wisconsin, particularly endangered or threatened species such as Kirtland's Warblers and Greater Prairie-Chickens, which need active management to maintain their populations. Our primary concerns include: a halt to vital land acquisition for wildlife under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, loss of key science staff positions directly related to bird conservation, and reduction of the Natural Resources Board to "advisory" status, giving unilateral control to the DNR Secretary to sell land and easily change long-held conservation policies.

Habitat loss is the biggest factor in the decline of bird populations. The proposed budget would freeze new land purchases for conservation under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund. This important fund was created in 1989 and has been used to protect over 500,000 acres of some of Wisconsin's most important natural areas. Freezing these funds until 2028 will prevent us from acting quickly should ecologically significant lands become available for protection. Some people will say that we have already protected enough land, but ecosystems and animal communities are not static. We need to remain flexible enough to purchase and protect vital lands when needed.

WSO urges the Wisconsin Joint Committee on Finance to restore stewardship funding to benefit both game and non-game bird species.





The budget would also eliminate 66 DNR positions, with a disproportionate number (18) from the Bureau of Science Services. Researchers in Science Services gather and analyze data that influence management decisions on waterfowl, loons, grouse and songbirds. Management activities need to be linked to this scientific process in order to better understand how land use decisions affect local wildlife. The integration of science and management creates a valuable feedback loop to inform, and potentially adjust, future management practices.

WSO urges the Wisconsin Joint Committee on Finance to eliminate the proposed reductions in WDNR's Bureau of Science Services, and to continue to fund scientific research that informs management decisions.

Lastly, this budget will greatly weaken the powers of the Natural Resources Board, which was one of Aldo Leopold's inspired ideas to keep conservation decisions balanced between long-term and short-term interests. This board acts as an effective check and balance to DNR management decision-making. By making this board "advisory" in nature, the DNR Secretary would have full discretionary power over the sale of public lands and to unilaterally change long-held conservation practices. The Natural Resources Board, all appointed by the governor and serving staggered terms once appointed, tends to represent a long-term vision. The governor's appointed DNR Secretary, serving at his ongoing pleasure, is more subject to immediate political influences. Many natural resource issues and programs involve long time frames to effectively implement and are hard to judge when focusing only on short time frame considerations. Essentially, the people of Wisconsin would lose a well-balanced system that has served them so well for so long..

WSO urges the Wisconsin Joint Committee on Finance to maintain the Natural Resources Board's rule-making authority, and thereby continue to give Wisconsin's citizens a political voice.

We thank the Committee for all the work that you do, constantly making difficult financial decisions for the people of Wisconsin. We recognize that you are all working to best represent your constituents and to keep Wisconsin moving forward. We understand the





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challenges our great state faces with regards to budgetary concerns, but we urge you to look past the short term financial gains these budget cuts offer to the long-term conservation gains that benefit all citizens of and visiting tourists to our beautiful state. (Global birding and ecotourism is a billion dollar industry!)

In conclusion, these budget cuts are not right for birds and other wildlife, not to mention our enjoyment of nature. This is clearly a step in the wrong direction for a state that so values its wildlife and wild places.

Sincerely,

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