

News

Conservation is non-partisan

Local, county and regional groups discuss northland conservation priorities

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Members of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, Bayfield Regional Conservancy and county conservation departments among others gathered to share thoughts on conservation priorities in the Lake Superior region Tuesday evening. The listening session held by the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters identified and welcomed feedback on issues of importance to the conservation community.

"In Wisconsin, we value conservation across the board. It doesn't have a political party," said Jennifer Giegerich, capitol liaison for the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters. "But, across the state in different areas, different issues come to the forefront. What's kind of interesting is figuring out what campaigns will draw excitement all around the state."

Giegerich said the league formed in 2002 when conservation efforts seemed to be on the back burner in the state Legislature.

"We were losing and losing badly," Giegerich said. "Not only were we not passing good legislation, but we were seeing a whole set of things that we had worked so hard for decades before being rolled back in the state Legislature." However, the capitol liaison said they've gained ground since then with 19 conservation bills adopted in the 2009-2010 session.

"Every year we have more and more groups who are part of the conservation priority-setting process," claims Giegerich, adding that 85 conservation-based organizations took part last year. She's hoping for around 100 this go-around.

"We're looking for the issues that really grab people's attention," said Giegerich.

Meanwhile, reestablishing the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, support for citizen monitoring projects, forestry management, funding and incentives for people to partake in conservation efforts topped the list among those present.

"Timing and opportunity may be in place for that one," Mike Gardner remarked of the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, which employed young men and women to carry out conservation and natural resource projects until it ceased operations in 2003. Gardner is the program director of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute (SOEI). "Nothing has replaced that," he said.

Ashland science teacher and Wisconsin Conservation Congress member Bruce Prentice agreed. "It benefitted everybody at every level," Prentice said. "I don't know how we lost that."

"Other than a paper route, my first job was as a WCC student," said Ashland County Land and Water Conservation Department conservationist Tom Fratt.

At the same time, Matt Hudson added, other citizen-based monitoring projects needed to be promoted as well. Hudson is with the Bad River Watershed Association. He noted the Wisconsin Department of

Natural Resources has come out with a document for volunteer-collected data to be accepted by the agency.

"What's missing is — I don't feel like DNR fully understands the potential or supports citizen-based efforts to collect that information," Hudson said. "Our organization is one example. We're having a really hard time right now funding our water quality program to collect that kind of information that could be used to support those citizen efforts."

Gardner added that support could come as a result of including such projects into a statewide agenda for environmental education. He said research on citizen-based water quality programs has shown they're most successful when the community is involved.

"A valuable component of a successful water education agenda is having citizen groups — individuals, parents working with youth — doing that. Schools can't do it on their own."

On the topic of forestry management, woodland owner Jim Jensen, of Morgan Falls, contended that Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law Program has become more of a vehicle for the timber industry than a tool for forest conservation. The state does give some incentives for keeping forests out of production.

"Of course, I want the benefits from the taxes, but I don't want it harvested because I'm not motivated economically," Jensen said. "If you're in the managed forest program, you're going to have pressure put on you to harvest your land in a renewable way so that it generates money for you and the state."

In addition, some of the ways in which forests are managed through the program can be harmful to other conservation efforts, such as protecting groundwater according to the SOEI's Gardner.

"Even aligning all of those pieces would be helpful," Gardner noted.

Preserving forests into the future is also a piece of the puzzle added Stacy Craig, educational board member of the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters Institute.

"The majority of forest lands is held in a demographic that is probably not going to be holding them into the future," Craig said. She said there's a lack of options or incentives for people to keep those forests intact.

Furthermore, another issue identified is decreasing funds from the state level for county conservation departments.

"We're just getting squeezed so tight you wonder how much longer you can survive," said Fratt. "It's very difficult for these poor counties of the north to take up that slack."

He adds that county conservation departments have increasingly looked toward grant funding to keep conservation efforts running.

"Quite often there's pretty strong strings attached to those grants too. The granters want you to do certain things so it reduces our flexibility to say what our priorities are."

As the pot of money shrinks, Fratt says departments are focusing more and more on state priorities. At the same time, they're getting more and more calls from local groups to help with citizen monitoring, restoration efforts or river protection projects.

"Your funders aren't funding collaborative processes," Craig agreed. "That's so essential to getting things done."

"There's a lot of excitement about a lot of different issues," Giegerich said, adding that a coalition of groups will vote in November on the top conservation priorities to be addressed in the next legislative session.

Giegerich smiled, "I don't think you could even guess right now what they would be."

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