



101 W. Main Street #204, P.O. Box 875, Ashland, WI 54806

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Contact: Sjana Schanning, President
(715) 682-2003

Bad River Watershed Association Statement on AB 1 and SB 1: Proposed changes to mining bill still detrimental to water quality and local citizens

The mission of the Bad River Watershed Association (BRWA) is to promote a healthy relationship between the people and natural communities of the Bad River watershed by involving all citizens in assessing, maintaining and improving watershed integrity for future generations. For the past 10 years, we have been working with our neighbors to ensure that change and development within the watershed grow from a stewardship ethic that seeks to minimize ecological damage, while maximizing ecological and community health.

The Bad River watershed drains over 1,000 square miles along Wisconsin's north shore. The Chequamegon National Forest is found at the headwaters. The rivers of the watershed are important spawning grounds for sturgeon, lake-run trout, salmon and walleye as well as many other fish. The unique wetland known as the Kakagon Slough/Bad River Slough is located at the mouth of the watershed on Lake Superior. This freshwater estuary is the largest and possibly most pristine remaining on Lake Superior.

We are not a tribal entity, but a community organization working with volunteers, towns, and counties to monitor water quality, improve stream crossings and riverbanks, protect fish habitat, and slow erosion. We are committed to gathering sound scientific data to help make good decisions for the long-term health of our community.

We are industry-neutral. We support sound environmental practices regardless of commercial activity including manufacturing, tourism, agriculture, timber or mining. We oppose practices that degrade water quality within the watershed and seek to assist in planning and providing for sound environmental practices while retaining economic viability.

In 2011 over 1,400 people signed our petition stating "Companies seeking to establish mining operations in Wisconsin should meet requirements that protect water quality and supply, while providing opportunity for public input. Current environmental regulations should not be weakened."

AB1/SB1 contains essentially identical provisions as the version of AB 426 amended by Joint Committee on Finance last session. We opposed those provisions in AB 426 that BRWA considers potentially detrimental to water quality and to the health and well-being of diverse communities dependent upon clean water, the most important being the Wisconsin citizens living and working within the watershed. A detailed explanation of our continuing concerns is contained in our written testimony of February 16, 2012 for the public hearing of the Joint Finance Committee (available at our website www.badriverwatershed.org). To the extent that AB1/SB1 contains similar provisions to the amended version of AB426, we remain opposed to this bill unless amended.

We oppose the provisions in AB1/SB1 that:

- eliminate or severely restrict citizen involvement in the permit process,
- exempt ferrous mining activities from current water quality laws or hold them to a weaker standard than other commercial or even residential activities that may impact water,
- exhibit little or no understanding of the function of wetlands in local watersheds and
- permit unrestricted commercial access to ground water regardless of effect.

These portions of AB1/SB1 are inconsistent with sound legislative practice and prudent science based environmental policy. Wisconsin is one of the few remaining states blessed with abundant clean water and some of the few remaining lakes and streams in the lower 48 states considered pristine. This is due in large part to the care and consideration our elected representatives have taken in developing our environmental regulations. Science may or may not direct policy but when policy seeks to deny or hide science then knowledge is reduced to commerce.

Signed,

The Bad River Watershed Association Board of Directors

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The Bad River Watershed Association is a nonprofit citizens group with the mission to promote a healthy relationship between the people and the natural communities of the Bad River Watershed by involving all citizens in assessing, maintaining, and improving watershed integrity for future generations.

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