

Restore the Voice of Wisconsin Conservation Congress

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 27 October 2021 09:39

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The Congress allows citizens to advise the DNR Board on issues affecting hunting, fishing and conservation practices in Wisconsin.

EAU CLAIRE - The best policies come from citizens themselves. Subject matter experts, hobbyists or trained professionals are the best advisors lawmakers have when proposing new bills.

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress (WCC) may just be the best example of how policies can be introduced and adopted by citizens' own initiative. Established in 1934 by the State Conservation Commission – the predecessor to the Natural Resources Board (NRB) – the WCC allows citizens to share their input with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

In 1972, Governor Patrick Lucey signed legislation that legally recognized the WCC. Under Wisconsin State Statutes, "The conservation congress shall be an independent organization of citizens of the state and shall serve in an advisory capacity to the natural resources board on all matters under the jurisdiction of the board."

There are five board members from every county chosen each spring to participate in the Conservation Congress. During the spring meeting, held simultaneously in each county, any citizen present is given a ballot with proposed policy measures for the DNR. This is where

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Wisconsinites can discuss ideas and express their opinions about what happens in our woods and waterways. It's often the first place lawmakers look when crafting new bills. Since the 1930s, the WCC guided the Natural Resources Board in their decision-making based on how citizens voted at the spring meetings. It can't get more democratic than that.



The process by which the WCC works is exactly how policies should be developed in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, during last week's public hearing in the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues, we realized that many current legislators are ignoring this formula and dismissing citizen involvement altogether. Recently, lawmakers hastily introduced a package of bills affecting hunting, fishing and conservation practices; soon after, they rushed to hold a public hearing.

Dozens of Wisconsinites and advocacy groups testified during the six-hour long hearing. When the National Turkey Federation testified with concerns about one bill that would affect the turkey hunting season, I asked if they'd been approached and consulted by the bill authors. They said they had not. I asked the same question to members of Trout Unlimited who shared their concerns regarding a bill that increases the stock of brook trout in Lake Michigan; they also responded in the negative.

This went on all day. It became evident that the bill authors had no regard for what Wisconsin sportsmen and women really cared about. The only group, as it turned out, that was consulted and registered in favor of all the bills came from Kansas. Even the Wisconsin Conservation Congress was taken by surprise by this package of legislation they did not ask for.



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This is all very troubling, but I can honestly say I'm not too surprised. We should've seen the writing on the wall when back in 2011, the Majority Party passed legislation that essentially prevented conservationists from directly offering rule revisions to the NRB. 2011 Act 21 created an 18-step process that can take two-three years to complete. This has made the rule-making process so difficult that Conservation Congress meetings rarely adopt rule changes in even years of the biennium.

Despite these changes, I still attend the meetings in my county because I trust the discussion to be honest and sincere. I also introduced a bill to reinstate the power of the WCC. As we've seen this year, there are people, like Fred Prehn, who don't respect our democratic processes or Wisconsin's conservation record. We can avoid bad policies and protect Wisconsin's natural resources by restoring the voices of the WCC. The Senate must also act and approve Governor Evers' appointment to the NRB.

The best legislators are wise enough to consult with citizens who know best how a policy will affect the state. No one should think they know all they need to know simply from their own experiences. That's not to say that all advice given is perfect right away, but it's all part of the process. The Wisconsin Conservation Congress has worked well for Wisconsin – and it's what we need today to preserve our natural resources for the next generation of Wisconsinites.