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OPPORTUNITIES NOW: Issue Briefing Papers

Priority Issues and Actions for Wisconsin's Natural Resources



2019
2021

INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin's Green Fire Opportunities Now 2019-2021 Briefing Paper Introduction

Opportunities Now 2019-2021 summarizes five major threats to Wisconsin's natural resources and identifies steps state government can take in the next few years to achieve better conservation outcomes. This briefing paper provides a short background on each of the five issues and summarizes recommended actions at the policy, budget, and agency level.

Opportunities Now looks at five priority issues:

- Water Pollution from Agriculture
- Groundwater Withdrawals
- Our Land and Water Legacy (Knowles - Nelson Stewardship Fund)
- Chronic Wasting Disease
- Climate Change

While these are important conservation issues in Wisconsin, they are clearly not the only critical environmental and conservation challenges facing the state, and not the only issues of concern to Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF). We selected these five issues based on opportunities for state action as well as the threats posed by inaction. We considered threats to public health and safety, and the rights of Wisconsin citizens to enjoy and utilize our state's natural resources.

Wisconsin's Green Fire is uniquely positioned for this analysis. Formed in 2017, WGF is an independent organization of natural resource professionals dedicated to promoting science-based management of natural resources. Our members include career natural resource professionals and scientists from a variety of disciplines throughout Wisconsin. *Opportunities Now* is a data-driven evaluation of threats and Wisconsin's current management response, informed by the professional experience of our members.

Opportunities Now identifies specific actions that can be taken at the policy, budget, and agency level of state government in 2019-2021.

It also describes longer term directions needed to maintain Wisconsin's outdoor traditions and the health and bounty of our environment and natural resources.

Wisconsin's more than century-long tradition of conservation victories reminds us that great outcomes are possible with shared purpose. We believe that today can be a positive inflection point in our conservation history – where we collectively recognize our greatest assets and greatest threats, and we summon the resolve needed to seize important opportunities.

The full report: *Opportunities Now 2019-2021* is available at <https://wgreenfire.org> or by contacting us at info@wgreenfire.org.

Priority ISSUE

AGRICULTURAL WATER POLLUTION



Clark County, WI. Photo by Bruce Neeb

Summary

The majority of farmers want to protect the environment and practice land stewardship to the best of their capabilities. It is an unfortunate reality however that agricultural practices are one of the leading sources of water pollution in Wisconsin, affecting drinking water, as well as lakes and streams. The growing concentration of larger farm operations, together with effects of more frequent intense precipitation patterns are almost certainly contributing to the increased water pollution observed under the management policies and resources in place today.

The pollution potential of the 1.279 million dairy cattle estimated in Wisconsin today is more than four times greater than all of Wisconsin's 5.8 million people.

Nonpoint water pollution, primarily from agricultural sources, is the most frequent cause of impairment for all waters in Wisconsin. There were 1,295 Wisconsin waters considered impaired prior to 2018, and in 2018 the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) proposed adding 240 new waters to the impaired list.

If we are measuring success in our water protection efforts by the number of impaired waters or contaminated water supplies, then the existing incentive-based systems for improving practices and limiting nutrient runoff are failing.

Wisconsin's agriculture community will need to be a key partner in developing new options and improving upon existing programs.

Recommendation Summary 2019-2021:

Policy

- Support a sustained collaboration between the agriculture community, government, universities, and conservationists to recommend new policies and strategies to effectively protect drinking water.

Budget: Invest in Compliance and Incentives

- Increase annual funding for county conservation staffing and support grants.
- Increase cost-share grant funding for agriculture runoff projects above the current \$3.5 million.
- Increase permanent staffing for the DNR Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) program to reflect continued industry expansion and support improved compliance.
- Increase CAFO permit fees to better reflect actual costs of program oversight, and allow the permit fees to fund the DNR CAFO program. Consider tiered rates based on facility size.

State Agencies

- DNR, Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) and other state and federal partners need stronger collaboration to update technical standards, planning tools, and best practices.
- All agricultural or livestock operations, regardless of size, should be required to report manure spills that may affect Wisconsin's waters.

Priority ISSUE

GROUNDWATER WITHDRAWALS



Photo by George Kraft. Huron Lake, November 2012

Summary

Wisconsin is in a region of abundant fresh water, but water withdrawal from combined municipal, agricultural and industrial uses is limiting water availability in some areas and is creating environmental impacts and user conflicts. Those impacts and conflicts will only increase without science-based policies to sustainably manage Wisconsin's groundwater resources. The DNR's authority over groundwater uses, and its responsibility to consider the cumulative impact of groundwater withdrawals, has been an issue of controversy for some time.

In just the six-county Central Sands Region, the number of high capacity wells has increased from fewer than 100 in the early 1950s, to more than 3200 permitted wells today.

Current limitations on authority to manage groundwater prevent Wisconsin from protecting the public interest in waters of the state and allows groundwater resources to be privatized.

DNR reporting metrics do not address cumulative impacts of extensive water use and the environmental and property rights impacts associated with groundwater drawdowns.

Reliance by the DNR on an Attorney General's 2016 opinion that conflicts with recent court decisions limits the DNR's ability to properly manage groundwater and to ensure protection of Wisconsin's public trust waters.

Recommendation Summary 2019-2021:

Policy

Wisconsin needs a statewide policy framework that provides clear guidance to assure:

- Groundwater and surface water are recognized as public waters of the state, and private or public uses may not individually or cumulatively impair those waters, unduly harm the rights of other water users, or cause undue environmental impairment or damage.
- Best available scientific methods and data are used to determine the amount of surface and ground water that may be sustainably withdrawn.
- Authority is established to allocate water withdrawals among users.

State Agencies

- The DNR should apply and adapt scientific tools to determine reasonable use of groundwater to prevent over-utilization and protect public rights in navigable waters.
- Develop goals, objectives and reportable measures on sustainable water use.
- The DNR should train staff and educate the public about the history, value, and application of the Public Trust Doctrine.

Priority ISSUE

OUR LAND AND WATER LEGACY



Photo by Gary Nski – Good Ideas Company, LLC

Summary

Wisconsin's diverse public lands and parks are important for outdoor recreation, our economy, and quality of life. The [Outdoor Industry Association](#) estimates that consumer spending on outdoor recreation in Wisconsin totals \$17.9 billion annually. Since its establishment in 1989, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been Wisconsin's flagship program for public land acquisition, conservation and development. Stewardship funding, often leveraged with federal, county, municipal, non-profit or private funds, has protected more than 669,000 acres of state lands, including many of Wisconsin's most beautiful and ecologically significant lands and waters. As Wisconsin approaches the 30-year anniversary of the Stewardship Program, public support for protection and improvement of conservation land remains strong. **The Stewardship Program authorization expires in 2020 and the program will need to be re-authorized in the current state budget to continue.** The debt service costs on bonding related to the Stewardship Program reflect a growing need for dedicated revenue that could provide stable program funding. It will be important to continue to build a statewide consensus on land and water conservation, with traditional outdoor users joined by younger and more diverse users, including residents in under-served urban communities.

Recommendation Summary 2019-2021:

Budget

- Reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and substantially increase total annual funding to address current needs and emerging priorities.
- Clarify authorization for state and local governments to prioritize Stewardship funds to acquire and protect wetlands and other lands to reduce flooding and protect water quality.
- Allow the DNR to carry forward funds from one year to the next and transfer funds between property management subprograms to support projects that require more than one year to complete. Provide at least \$14 million for state parks and land development to help fund critical facilities maintenance and development.
- Allow state parks to reinvest surplus revenue in the parks. The parks have generated surplus revenue for the past five years due to market pricing of campsites and increased attendance.

State Agencies

- The DNR should update the composition and reconvene the Stewardship Advisory Council to help inform a new strategic direction for the Stewardship Program.

Priority ISSUE

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE



DNR Staff collecting tissue samples for CWD testing. Photo Credit: Wisconsin DNR

Summary

Deer hunting in Wisconsin is a tradition enjoyed by over 800,000 hunters annually with nearly \$1.4 billion in annual state economic impact. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) threatens our deer hunting tradition. CWD was first detected in the state in 2001. Currently 55 counties are considered “CWD-affected,” which means they are within at least 10 miles of a wild or captive deer that has tested positive for CWD. Wildlife management agencies around the country agree on Best Management Practices for prevention, surveillance, and management of CWD. However, Wisconsin has not adopted many of these practices. **The threat posed by CWD warrants a stronger commitment to science-based management to limit the spread.**

Recommendation Summary 2019-2021:

Policy

- **Statewide baiting and feeding bans.** Currently deer baiting and feeding is banned in 55 CWD-affected counties. A statewide ban would clarify the patchwork of current rules. Deer baiting and feeding concentrates animals and increases disease transmission.
- **Harvest flexibility and incentives.** DNR, together with County Deer Advisory Councils, should have flexibility to use hunting options, including Earn-A-Buck, to reduce CWD prevalence and spread. Incentives like “Payment for Positives” that maximize landowner and hunter participation in CWD management, should be explored.
- **Establish a Governor's Council on CWD** to help ensure the state's response is guided by best

available science and monitor state agency performance.

Budget:

- **CWD Testing.** Increase funding and capacity for more CWD testing by hunters in each county. Better testing methods with faster results are needed.
- **Increase permanent DNR CWD staffing** by authorizing new positions.
- **Permanent CWD Sample Processing Facility.** Allocate funds to acquire a facility near the area of high CWD prevalence.
- **CWD Research Partnership** - Provide \$2 million annually to be leveraged with funding from other Midwestern states, universities and federal agencies to advance high-priority research on CWD control.
- **Funding Sources.** Hunting license revenues are inadequate to sustain existing wildlife conservation programs and fund increased CWD management. New sources of stable funding from both state and federal sources are needed.

State Agencies

- **Depopulate and secure CWD positive deer farms.** Wisconsin currently has 7 CWD-positive captive deer herds whose continued operation poses an infection risk to surrounding wild herds. DATCP should use its existing authority to depopulate these herds and ensure that these facilities do not pose a future infection risk to the wild deer herd.
- **Timely and transparent reporting.** DNR and DATCP should collaborate to provide web-based access to CWD test results for wild and captive deer.

Priority ISSUE

CLIMATE CHANGE



Highway 13 in Ashland County July 2016. Photo by Nancy Larson

Summary

The pattern of damaging storms in Wisconsin is one of the most visible signs that our climate is changing. The impacts of climate change extend well beyond flood events and will increasingly alter life for Wisconsin residents and affect the prosperity of our communities.

Public officials at all levels need to properly assess and plan for serious weather events and other climate change impacts to minimize risks to health and safety and help protect vulnerable populations. Farmers and forest owners already assume significant risks to their investments in land and equipment. Climate change increases those risks and adds complexity to decision making. Natural resource managers in all disciplines need to prepare for climate change impacts on air, land, water, and fish and wildlife.

It is increasingly clear that preparing for climate change impacts needs to involve risk assessment, planning, and targeted investments to protect public safety and infrastructure.

Natural resources management can be a powerful tool for offsetting greenhouse gas emissions. The DNR is well positioned to support strategies around that effort.

Currently the DNR has no enterprise or performance measures related to climate change.

Recommendation Summary 2019-2021:

Policy

- Direct state agencies to coordinate government-wide efforts to reduce climate-related risk. Update the [2016 Wisconsin Hazard Mitigation Plan](#) as a vehicle for that planning.
- In 2019, the agencies identified in [Wisconsin's Changing Climate Report](#) (WICCI, 2011) should assess progress on the adaptation directions listed in the report.
- Incentivize local governments to update comprehensive land use plans to reflect climate risks

Budget:

- Fund the Comprehensive Planning Grant Program to create cost-sharing to help local units of government update their land use plans to reflect climate risk assessment and mitigation.
- Add staffing within the DNR to manage a climate risk assessment and adaptation program

State Agencies

- Climate change work and public information should be an acknowledged priority for DNR staff.
- Collect and analyze essential data such as stream-flow, lake levels, and climate-related air pollutants.
- Resume full participation in the Wisconsin Climate Change Initiative and provide staff support.
- DNR should undertake a risk assessment for department facilities and lands to assess threats from climate change and identify investments and strategies to address those threats.



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