

## One Step at a Time

How WGF is responding to federal impacts on science and conservation

*By Carolyn Pralle, WGF Communications and Outreach Coordinator*

Ten years ago, a friend of mine survived a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in Kathmandu, Nepal. The quake shook the Himalaya for hundreds of miles, killing nearly 9,000 people and damaging over 600,000 buildings. As she recounted the story to me, her voice shook too, saying, "I couldn't trust the ground anymore."

What do we do when we can't trust the ground? Where do we focus when the changes feel overwhelming? How do we find our footing when the systems we count on get dismantled? We take it one step at a time.

- Step one: make a decision. Decide, simply, we will not give up.
- Step two: make connections. Find the other people who care.

Luckily for me, those two steps lead straight here to Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF). We are known as go-to voices for conservation because we ground our work in the best-available science and the deep knowledge and experiences of our technical experts.

Since our founding in 2017, WGF has generally focused on state-level conservation issues. Yet, these issues have always been interconnected at local, state, tribal, federal and international levels. Throughout 2025, we have brought federal changes into the forefront of our work. As the expression goes, "history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes." At our founding and in the present, we're navigating policy changes, science funding cuts, mass-firings of public employees, and a disturbing feeling that our conservation legacy is unraveling.

Perhaps you're thinking—well, what is WGF doing about it? How do we move forward? That's what this issue of Confluences is all about. As of November 2025, we have taken action on dozens of conservation issues at federal and state levels this year. Across the breadth of topics, each connects to the five conservation

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# Reflections

A Message from WGF Leadership

By Meleesa Johnson, WGF Executive Director

## Perspective on the last two years

Perspective is everything! Depending on your perspective, two years is a blip in the fabric of time, or it is an eternity. For me, the past two years have been a bit of both.

I began my journey as your Executive Director of WGF on the first day of November 2023. At one of my first Zoom meetings, I listened in on a multi-state, multi-tribal nation, multi-academic institution planning meeting related to manoomin (wild rice). I remember being absolutely captivated by the breadth of the discussion and the immense intellect and knowledge of this massive group. I was in awe.

Soon after, I enjoyed an amazing lunch with WGF Ambassador Tia Nelson. I marveled at the stories of her father, Gaylord Nelson, personal stories I had never heard. Her stories reframed for me the idea of working across the aisle and never giving up on a dream. I was in awe again.

These experiences were followed by many, many more meetings, each a rocket ship of learning. I enjoyed sharing time and ideas learning

alongside current WGF supporters like you. Together, we welcomed new friends to our WGF community. I worked with WGF's subject matter experts to ensure our advocacy was grounded in science and the broad perspective of many voices. Time flew by.

Then election day 2024 happened. Time became amorphous. Uncertainty strangled many with fear. And as the days unfolded, we witnessed the purposeful evisceration of foundational environmental laws and fundamental research programs and facilities. With the scribble of a black magic marker, it seemed that the WGF experts' thousands of years of combined efforts to safeguard the environment and natural resources were written over or wiped out.

However, as with any event or situation where uncertainty clouds direction, we regrouped to chart our course. We kept cool, kept our focus, and kept looking at that uncertain horizon, knowing that doing nothing simply was not an option.

We marched forward onto the national stage, quickly and efficiently mobilizing to respond to proposed changes to a variety of environmental laws. We restructured a great deal of our work to ensure we have capacity to help tell the stories of these laws and the impacts they have on everyday life here in Wisconsin, across the United States, and around the world. We never gave up.

The past two years have been complicated, but life is complicated, isn't it? I want to thank all of you for the past two years. I wish I could personally shake each of your hands (or give you a hug) to say thank you for believing in this organization and supporting it. We have more work to do. Ready, set, go!

Ripening Manoomin, Chippewa Lake, Bayfield County.  
Photo by Don Behm.



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Edited by C. Pralle | November 2025



## LIGHTNING FLASH UPDATES

### Community Science Opportunity with Nitrate Watch

by Christine Mechenich, Project Co-leader,  
WGF Science Council Member

In August, WGF officially partnered with the Izaak Walton League of America on Nitrate Watch. This community science program allows anyone to help gather data about nitrate in Wisconsin's waters. In our first three months, we already have **70+ volunteers** around Wisconsin.

Nitrate is the most common chemical contaminant creating health risks in

Wisconsin's private wells. Nitrate also harms the water quality and ecological health of our lakes, streams and rivers.

Nitrate Watch is a great opportunity to "do something" for the waters you care about. Community scientists (like you) can measure and document the effects of land use practices on wells, local lakes, rivers and streams. Or, you might choose to track your community's drinking water quality over time.

Anyone can sign up to receive a kit of 25 water testing strips to test their private wells and/or any lake, stream or river they care about. These kits are completely free of charge. Scan this QR code to sign up, or learn more at [wigreenfire.org/nitratewatch](http://wigreenfire.org/nitratewatch).



Map of WGF Nitrate Watch volunteers' test sites as of Nov. 2025, via the Clean Water Hub.

### Northern Lakes Toolbox Workshops in 2025

by Mike Meyer, WGF Senior Scientist

This fall, WGF again held our Northern Lakes Toolbox workshop series. These workshops aimed to equip lake stakeholders with practical skills for collecting and analyzing data about their specific lakes. Ultimately, the workshops help enable participants in making informed planning and management decisions.



Northern Lakes Toolbox Workshop Participants, 2025. Photo by Mike Meyer.

Managing Wisconsin lakes is challenging due to shoreland development, aquatic invasive species, and recreational impacts that threaten habitats and water quality. Unlike private land, lakes in Wisconsin are public trust resources with diverse stakeholders. Lake owners and associations often need help evaluating risks and finding resources for effective lake management practices.

The workshops include a short course on lake ecology, hands-on use of WDNR online lake data, data gap analysis, and development of prioritized protection and restoration plans. Afterward, participants received personalized lake reports with data analysis and recommended action plans. Instructors included Dr. Mike Meyer, Jim Kreitlow, and Pat Goggin. Together, they have over 100 years of experience in researching, managing, and educating about Wisconsin lakes.

The 2025 workshops had 18 participants from 17 different lake districts and associations across Vilas, Oneida, Iron, and Langlade counties. The sessions took place at the University of Wisconsin Kemp Natural Resource Center in Woodruff, Wisconsin. To learn more, including funding information, visit [wigreenfire.org/our-work/northern-lakes-toolbox-workshop](http://wigreenfire.org/our-work/northern-lakes-toolbox-workshop).



Mick Mlinar. Photo by Holly Wissing.



Autumn Tamaracks, Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest. Photo by Jeff Henry.

## Supporter Spotlight: Mick Mlinar

by Erica LeMoine, WGF Philanthropy and Membership Coordinator

Mick has been a donor to WGF since its inception. A former commercial photographer from Milwaukee, he has worked the second part of his life volunteering for numerous conservation organizations and all the projects that they entail. His current work rehabilitating forty acres on a wilderness lake has allowed for a full-time experiment in the fold of Aldo Leopold.

### How did you first learn about WGF?

I've known three WGF members for many years. Bryan Pierce (former WGF Board Member) and I go back to the early days of Northwoods Land Trust. Bill Fisher (WGF Fisheries Work Group chair) and I own adjacent property on a wilderness lake that has been put into conservancy with the Northwoods Land Trust. I've also known Dr. Mike Meyer (WGF Senior Scientist) for many years, going back to his loon monitoring research for WDNR.

### What first motivated you to support WGF?

Most issues that concern me are environmental, and I try to support these generously. I don't understand how we got to the point where science and good environmental policy is no longer respected both at the state and federal level. WGF is bridging this gap at the state level.


### What conservation issues matter most to you?

It all comes back to global warming. That is the big gorilla in the room. We can discuss anything you want, but ultimately global warming becomes the issue that is driving societal and environmental problems. We are robbing future generations of their right to a livable planet that will sustain a decent life.

Lakes are freezing later, opening earlier, becoming warmer. I've seen this firsthand over more than three decades of owning property in northern Wisconsin. Many of us have lost contact with the natural world and tend not to notice the environmental changes that are occurring around us. This leads to a lack of urgency in adopting policies that will protect our environment.

### What else has been a highlight of your experience supporting WGF?

The reason I support WGF is that it is a science-based, state-level organization that advocates on environmental issues both to the legislature and to the general public. I'm impressed that retired environmental professionals have donated so much of their time and expertise to deal with current issues affecting the health of our planet.

Thank you, Mick! 

Learn more about supporting WGF at [wigreenfire.org/make-a-difference/support-our-work](https://wigreenfire.org/make-a-difference/support-our-work).



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priorities in our 2022-2027 strategic plan (see [wigreenfire.org/our-conservation-priorities](https://wigreenfire.org/our-conservation-priorities)). Our work ranges from detailed analyses and specific comments to the Federal Register to pieces highlighting broad implications.

This list illustrates just a few of the many attacks on science and conservation in our country. It is a sampler of how we are navigating the quakes and aftershocks.

- A call for action from **Fisheries professionals** about the climate change crisis (community call to action)
- WGF opposes the United States Forest Service's (USFS) proposed rescission of the **Roadless Rule** (federal register comment letter)
- WGF advised USFS on **North Branch Vegetation Project** in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (comment letter to district rangers)
- WGF opposes the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) proposal to rescind the 2009 Greenhouse Gas **Endangerment Finding** (federal register comment letter)
- Opportunity for action - **Federal PFAS amendments** (sign-on letter to Congress)
- A New Chapter for the **U.S. Forest Service**? Less Productive, Less Prepared, and Flying Blind (informational essay)
- Letter urging the US Senate to support **United States Geological Survey (USGS) Ecosystems Mission Area** funding and workforce (letters to Congress)
- Is **killing birds** a necessary evil if it benefits a special interest? - Dr. Stanley Temple (informational essay)
- **Conservation history** ignored to weaken the Endangered Species Act - by Dr. Stanley Temple (informational essay)
- WGF opposes proposed rule change to the **Endangered Species Act** (federal register comment letter)

- Public comments on **rusty patched bumble bee** habitat (federal register comment letter)
- **Federal funding pause**: implications for WGF (informational essay)

Find more details about these responses and others by browsing [wigreenfire.org/latest-work](https://wigreenfire.org/latest-work) or searching by keyword on the WGF website.

As we move into 2026, our dedicated technical experts and staff are preparing to highlight the importance and relevance of federal and state environmental research to the people of Wisconsin and how cuts to scientific research are hurting our communities. We're opposing attempts to eliminate environmental protections for wildlife, forests, waters, and people. We're tracking the changes and preparing for the future.

Conservation is a complicated weave. Yet, we are powerful together. We need you working alongside us to keep it from unraveling.

If you feel motivated to take some next steps together, reach out to me at [cpalle@wigreenfire.org](mailto:cpalle@wigreenfire.org). Thank you. 

Call for art submissions! Share your creativity at [wigreenfire.org/art-writing-submission-guidelines](https://wigreenfire.org/art-writing-submission-guidelines)



Rusty patched bumblebee (*Bombus affinis*) on a giant purple hyssop. Photo by Jennifer Lazewski.

# Using Science to Protect Local Lakes from Enhanced Wakes

by Don Behm, WGF Communications Committee Chair

Bob Kovar, a WGF member, says peer-reviewed science provided Town of Manitowish Waters residents and officials “a leg to stand on” in support of restrictions on wake surfing on lakes there.

Science played a role in this contentious issue through Kovar’s distribution and use of a Wisconsin’s Green Fire (WGF) special report, [“The Effects of Wake Boats on Lake Ecosystem Health: A Literature Review,”](#) published in December 2024.

“It was a summary of the research done up to that time,” Bob said in a recent interview. “It let the science speak for itself” in stating conclusions.

Bob relied on the report for information on the impacts to inland lakes of powerful, enhanced waves created by wake boats for the sole purpose of surfing without a tow rope.

When town officials first discussed wake surfing in the summer of 2023, Bob’s searches found limited research on its impacts.

A year later, WGF’s comprehensive review provided “a scientific backstop” for the consideration of wake surfing restrictions, according to Bob. Studies of wake boats operating in wake-enhanced mode found they caused more damage to lake beds, aquatic plants, fish habitat, and shorelines than other recreational boats. Ballast tanks on wake boats also pose a greater risk of transferring aquatic invasive species between lakes.

At public meetings, Bob said he and others were confident in proposing restrictions based on depth of water and distance from shore, and he cited the WGF paper in memos to the Town Board.


After a January 2025 public meeting on wake surfing, he sent an email to a list of 500 people, with a link to the WGF report, and encouraged them to contact town officials and express support for restrictions. They did and many of them included personal stories of encounters with large enhanced wakes.



Wild Rice Lake view from Manitowish Waters.  
Photo by Bob Kovar (BK Photography).

“Concern over safety, and protecting their lakes, shorelines and properties, brought people together,” Bob said. In the end, he recalled, there were no realistic answers to the questions of how to enforce restrictions on wake surfing short of a prohibition or how to decontaminate ballast tanks.

In June 2025, the town board approved a prohibition on wake-enhanced boating on all lakes of more than 50 acres in the town. The Manitowish Waters and Boulder Junction town boards followed that in July 2025 with the same prohibition on two border lakes, Island Lake and Clear Lake. The ordinances do not ban other uses of wake boats.

In July 2025, four town property owners who are not year-round residents filed a lawsuit in Vilas County Circuit Court challenging the town’s ordinances. A Vilas County judge in decisions on July 31 and Aug. 7 denied the plaintiffs’ request to block the ordinances from going into effect. Both ordinances are in place at this time. 



Bob Kovar, Photographer, WGF Member



## PROFILES IN CONSERVATION

### Jennifer Lazewski

by Amy Mueller, WGF Communications Committee Member

Jennifer Lazewski is a Wisconsin's Green Fire member with a passion for pollinator conservation that is *buzzworthy*! It started with growing up as a curious kid in Milwaukee, encouraged by her grandfather who taught high school biology. She confesses, "I was a bug kid!"

Jennifer's education and early career took her to North Carolina to attend Duke University and, after law school in Chicago, to the courtroom handling complex litigation. Eventually, she returned to Milwaukee and worked in her family's import business. She also became a leader in the Wisconsin Master Gardener program and began to really bloom! Jennifer began teaching about the importance of native flowers, identifying local pollinators, and hosting pollinator walks at local nature centers.

Jennifer has been at the forefront of connecting people to our pollinators, especially identifying the endangered rusty patched bumble bee in Southeastern Wisconsin. While she spends a lot of time focused on rare bumble bees, her favorite pollinator is the more common black & gold "bomber" bumble bee as she lovingly refers to them!

Jennifer's volunteering passion ultimately led her to a career in conservation, most recently as Executive Director of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology. Through her work and volunteering experiences, she understands that all non-profits are facing capacity challenges. "It's critical to prioritize goals, while matching the skills and talents of people involved to make a real impact."

She is also excited to see the changing face of conservation with more women in the field and in leadership! She has enjoyed seeing this at the County level and on the Natural Resource Board. "The diversity of perspectives is helpful," Jennifer confirms, and certainly it is her diverse background that makes her a true asset to the conservation community.



### Jim Baumann

by Paul Heinen, WGF Policy Director

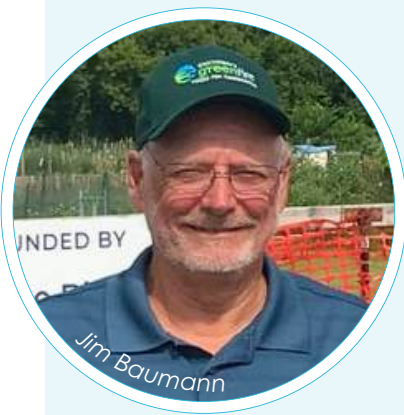
Jim Baumann can be seen at many WGF events with his 5-gallon pickle bucket. Big fan of pickles you ask? Well, no, he uses it to show people the large number of household items, including the pickle bucket, that contain PFAS, a.k.a. "forever chemicals." Despite their many industrial and household uses, PFAS are associated with many threats to our environment and human health.

He fills the pickle bucket with household items like dental floss, shoes, clothing, pots and pans, and lays them out on his table to show people what products contain PFAS that most people have in their homes. As a member of WGF's Contaminants of Emerging Concern Working Group, Jim works to address and clean up PFAS in Wisconsin using the best available scientific data.

In that work, Jim leads WGF's analyses on the cost of treating water for PFAS and charts statewide needs. At times, other conservation groups and decision-makers ask specifically for Jim's tables and analysis. Jim is passionate about making sure that people have the facts so they can make the best-informed decisions.

Jim received his B.S. degree from UW Madison in 1972 and his master's degree in 1975. In his current role for WGF, he draws on 30+ years of experience at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). He concluded his WDNR career as the Special Assistant to the Director of the Bureau of Watershed Management.

Jim is married and lives on the west side of Madison. His daughters Sarah and Erin live out west which gives him ample travel opportunities. Beyond his work with WGF, he is the coordinator of the Sheboygan Avenue Community Garden at Rennebohm Park in Madison. He is also a 30+ year veteran of the Madison Softball leagues, currently playing in the Senior League for the Pirates.





## Thank you for reading our Fall 2025 issue of **Confluences**.

We hope this newsletter helps keep you informed and connected with WGF. Thank you for being a supporter and a voice for conservation!

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Make a wish. Common milkweed seedpods in  
Vernon County, WI. Photo by Kerry Beheler.