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Motives of Select Committee on DNR Questionable
“Public” hearings and website limited to complaints, ignore other public input

Madison- Since the creation of a committee to evaluate the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Committee Chair Alan Lasee has made it very clear that the Committee will not take a balanced look at the DNR. Instead, the Committee has severely narrowed its focus to complaints about the government agency that is responsible for protecting Wisconsin’s drinking water and waterways, air quality, and pristine places.

According to Anne Sayers, Program Director for the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters, “The real agenda here seems to be to erode the laws Wisconsin has for protecting public health and natural resources. But rather than state their true agenda, they are picking on the agency charged with enforcing those laws.”

For example, when Senator’s Lasee, Zien and Schultz introduced the committee at a news conference, they cited several undocumented examples of individuals who had complaints about the DNR. In many cases, the individuals’ complaints stem from the fact that they broke the law...and were caught.

“For the vast majority of citizens who obey the laws that were created to protect our health and well-being, this Committee has no intention of hearing how they benefit from the work of the Department of Natural Resources,” said Sayers.

An email sent to residents in the Arbor Vitae area on Tuesday, December 20th stated that “The purpose of this Senate hearing is to take complaints from citizens regarding the DNR...” The email later explained that “Senator Alan Lasee’s office has given me advance notice of this hearing so that we can effectively mobilize a solid turnout.”

The general public was not notified of the dates and locations of the public hearing until three days later on Friday, December 23, a holiday for most Wisconsin citizens. The

public announcement stated that Senator Lasee is “eager to hear the valuable input from residents all across this state.”

However, from the email received by Arbor Vitae-area residents and an appearance Senator Lasee made on public radio on December 29th, it is clear the Committee will not listen to any citizens that have positive things to say about the DNR.

“It would appear Senator Lasee is only eager to hear input from the minority of Wisconsin citizens whose complaints about the DNR back up the polluting special interests and campaign donors of the committee members,” said Anne Sayers, Program Director for the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters.

“People who have had a good experiences with the DNR aren’t welcome at these hearings, which means the Committee will not hear from vast majority of Wisconsin citizens who want a clean and healthy environment to protect the rights of property owners, to protect the health of our families, and to create a state where businesses locate and thrive,” concluded Sayers.

To see just a few examples of the work the Department of Natural Resources is doing to protect Wisconsin’s health and natural resources, see below.

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Note to media: For a copy of the email sent by former legislator Lorraine Seratti three days before the hearings were publicly announced, please contact the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters.

The Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters (WLCV) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to electing conservation leaders to the state legislature and encouraging lawmakers to champion conservation policies that effectively protect Wisconsin's public health and natural resources. More information can be found at www.conservationvoters.org.

What Does the Department of Natural Resources Do?

1. By only accepting complaints, the special committee chaired by Senator Lasee will not hear DNR success stories like those that demonstrate how DNR employees put their own lives at risk to be the first responder to clean up toxic spills. For example:

On March 4, 1996 at 5:55a.m. a Wisconsin Central train derailed 35 cars on the edge of Weyauwega, a small town of 1,700 in northeast Wisconsin. Fourteen cars contained pressurized liquid gas. Several gas tank cars ruptured and ignited. Nine thousand gallons of sodium hydroxide were released from two other cars. Because the derailment was close to town and there were potential fire and explosion hazards, the entire town was evacuated -- for what most thought would be a brief time, but ended up being for 17 days until gas and electric lines were restored.

Roxanne Chronert, Department of Natural Resources spills coordinator, was part of a team that worked to handle the immediate health and safety concerns and the potential long-term environmental implications. Roxanne and DNR wardens worked 12-hour shifts. "Conditions in the gas tanker cars could have led to a major explosion, igniting the remaining tanker cars and potentially destroying portions of the town," recalls Chronert.

Roxanne Chronert considers her job one of the best the agency has to offer. "Each day when I come to work, I never know what I'm going to be dealing with," she says. On a typical day, Roxanne will get calls about various spills. She also routinely meets with local fire departments and other response agencies, including DNR wardens, to discuss various spill response issues. "I like getting to know them and having them get to know me," she explained. "Then when an emergency arises, we know exactly what to expect from each other and can focus on managing the emergency. This is what leads to successful responses that keep the citizens and communities well protected."

With approximately 800 spills reported annually in Wisconsin, and the majority of spills occurring in populated areas, the job Roxanne Chronert does is invaluable for protecting the health and safety of Wisconsin residents and minimizing long-term damage to our water, land and air.

2. By only accepting complaints, the special committee chaired by Senator Lasee will not hear DNR success stories like the one below where DNR employees protected the public's drinking water:

The work of Steve Janowiak, Drinking Water Specialist in the DNR's Wisconsin Rapids office and Brian Ezman, Environmental Warden in the DNR's Wausau office, led to the conviction of an unlicensed man who was improperly installing pumps in private drinking water wells. The man had installed pumps in four wells at private homes with illegal, unsanitary pumps. Not only can improperly built wells and incorrectly installed pumps produce unsafe water for the well owners, they can also contaminate neighboring wells. The work of these two DNR employees stopped the man from causing drinking water problems for other homeowners in the area.

3. By only accepting complaints, the special committee chaired by Senator Lasee will not hear DNR success stories like those that demonstrate how the DNR helps bring polluting industries that endanger the health of Wisconsin citizens to justice:

The Attorney General recently settled a case against Menards for illegally disposing of hazardous wastes and discharging pollutants into Wisconsin waterways. The state was able to bring this successful enforcement action to protect public health and our natural resources because Menards employees who were witness to the violations were able to report the violations to DNR staff. The DNR then did a thorough investigation of the allegations and turned the results over to the Department of Justice in September 2004 leading to a successful prosecution.

4. By only accepting complaints, the special committee chaired by Senator Lasee will not hear DNR success stories like those that demonstrate how the DNR helps reduce the amount of pollutants running into Wisconsin's lakes, rivers, and drinking water:

In March of 2005, there was a major kill of brown trout in the West Branch of the Sugar River. Once again, the DNR took action to quickly and effectively control the situation. Wardens Jeff King, Dave Holmes and Chuck Horn quickly tracked down the source of the fish kill to manure that had been spread on frozen ground. In cases such as this fish kill, DNR staff follow-up by working with the farmer to prevent further spills, taking enforcement action when necessary and taking steps to restore the stream.

5. By only accepting complaints, the special committee chaired by Senator Lasee will not hear DNR success stories like those that demonstrate how DNR wardens protect the safety of hunters and fishers who enjoy the opportunities Wisconsin's natural resources provide:

DNR Regional Warden Mike Bartz coordinated DNR's response to the Sawyer County homicides in November 2004. In this capacity, Regional Warden Bartz used his training and experience to direct warden operations including preservation of the crime scene, protection of officer and public safety, follow-up investigative work, incident mitigation and dealing with the media and public. The most critical component of Mike's involvement was within the first five hours of the shootings - coordinating response, setting up the perimeter and coordinating ground and air efforts to locate the suspect.

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