After lakes victory, getting to work

Strong implementation is key to see benefits

This time of year, when we think about lakes, we’re more likely to think about ice fishing or skating than we are to think about diving in. But before the ice melts, our state leaders will have made some crucial decisions that will affect our favorite swimming holes and fishing spots for summers to come.

Last fall, we won strong new protections for our lakes; this winter, our lawmakers are deciding how strongly and how quickly to implement those rules. The rules are meant to reduce the amount of pollution that runs off from our farms, cities and construction sites, which choke our lakes and streams with algae and make them too often unswimmable. The rules we won are strong, but they will only work as well as our leaders allow.

“Wisconsin’s lakes and rivers are the foundation for our economy, our environment and our quality of life,” said DNR Secretary Matt Frank in a press release when the rules went into effect in December. “Wisconsin can look forward to cleaner beaches, more swimmable lakes, improved public health, healthier fisheries and wildlife habitat.”

The rules are finally being implemented after years of research and public input from stakeholders including farmers, city water managers, manufacturers, local governments, and environmental groups including Wisconsin Environment. In our support for and advocacy of the rules, we were joined by the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, Dairy Business Association, Clean Wisconsin and the Sierra Club, among many other groups.

Our thousands of conversations with people from all over Wisconsin, hours of lobbying state officials in Madison and pages upon pages of news coverage and editorials all showed Wisconsinites’ overwhelming support for protecting our lakes. The rules applying to wastewater went into effect on Dec. 1, and rules that apply to farms and construction sites went into effect on Jan. 1.

Already, the polluting interests who opposed the rules are lining up at the state Legislature to weaken them. But we’ll keep watch to make sure our lakes finally get the protection they deserve.

Regional Program Director Dan Kohler canoeing on the Mississippi River along Perrot State Park.

Read about our campaign to protect our state parks on page 3.

more online
To our members

Once again, the political winds have shifted. New faces are in power in Washington, D.C., and here in Madison.

Yet when it comes to Wisconsin’s environment, the challenges and opportunities we face remain the same. We’re doing a better job of keeping pollution from running off into Lake Geneva, Lake Mendota and our hundreds of other beautiful inland lakes, but we need to do better. We’re proud of having the nation’s oldest state park system, but we’re struggling to fund our parks and keep them open. We have tremendous potential to harness the wind that blows across our farmland and waste less energy when we travel, yet the policies that can make it happen are being challenged.

Regardless of who’s up and who’s down in Madison and Washington, we have our work cut out for us. Thanks to your support, we’re ready to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,
Megan Severson
Advocate

Recent action

Wisconsin fifth in the nation for solar

The solar industry is growing, and Wisconsin is one of the states whose economy is benefiting the most. According to a new report by the Solar Foundation and Green LMI Consulting, our state has the fifth-biggest concentration of solar jobs in the United States, with more than 6,000 people across the state already employed by the industry.

Employment figures for solar power nationwide have nearly doubled in the last year, and they are expected to grow another 26 percent in the coming 12 months—or 24,000 additional jobs in 2011—at a time when overall employment is only expected to grow 2 percent.

Big storms, the new norm?

In 2008, heavy rains triggered the Midwest’s second “500-year” flooding event in 15 years. That June, all-time high streamflows were recorded on the Wisconsin River. Scientists project that global warming could affect the frequency and severity of such extreme weather events in the coming decades.

Wisconsin Environment’s recent report, “Global Warming and Extreme Weather,” suggests that the extreme weather events we’ve seen of late may be a taste of the new normal if we experience the worst effects of global warming.

We’re using the findings of the report to push our lawmakers to reduce the pollution that causes global warming. That means taking first steps, like introducing stronger efficiency standards for appliances and buildings, as well as launching larger-scale efforts to increase the amount of electricity we generate from the sun and the wind.
In 1878, when state leaders set aside more than 700 square miles of land in northern Wisconsin to establish the nation’s first state park, they made a statement: Our parks are important, and they deserve our protection and attention. Ever since, the rolling hills and winding streams of our state parks have been an integral part of Wisconsin’s identity. Over the next hundred years, the rest of the nation followed suit, and built a national parks system that represents the best our country has to offer.

Our parks are growing more and more popular, as people stick closer to home to explore our state’s natural beauty. But even as more visitors flock to our rivers and hike in our hills, both our state and national parks systems face budget cuts that will make them increasingly difficult to maintain and protect. The number of people visiting the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway grew by more than 7 percent; the number of people visiting our state parks grew by 5 percent. But the state slashed $1 million from the parks budget in 2008 and 2009, and the parks face still more cuts.

A report released by our national federation, “The Best of America Under Threat from Underfunding,” outlined the growing threats that funding shortfalls pose to places like the St. Croix Riverway.

“Last year, visitors poured into these great parks to go hiking, camping and kayaking,” said Wisconsin Environment’s Megan Severson. “Yet just as their popularity grows, they are under threat from underfunding.”

Growing popularity
Places like Devil’s Lake and the Dells have taken on renewed importance for Wisconsinites as the recession squeezes family vacation budgets—leading to the increase in visits in 2009. The parks rely on state funds to hire park rangers, keep park facilities and trails properly maintained, and pay for popular programs like camping—so budget cuts will make it even harder for park stewards to keep our favorite places in good shape.

“Now is the time for protecting these great places,” Severson said. “Instead, they face painful cuts that could delay maintenance, lead to fewer rangers being hired, or force cutbacks on programs.”

Shrinking budgets
The threats confronting Wisconsin’s parks are echoed around the country. Wisconsin Environment’s report reveals that, nationwide, two-thirds of national parks saw their visitorship climb in 2009, including parks in nearly every state. However, nearly three-quarters of these increasingly popular parks are facing budget cuts in 2011.

“Just like St. Croix, parks throughout America are becoming more popular destinations,” Severson said. “They offer families affordable vacations and are ideal places for people of all ages to explore the great outdoors. We need to give our parks the resources to ensure that they are just as majestic in 2999 as they were in 2009.”

How many pies can you buy at 60 mpg?

Last Thanksgiving, as the Obama administration considered a new round of fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks as millions of Americans took to the road, Alex Wall, an associate with Wisconsin Environment’s Washington, D.C., office, got to wondering: How much money would Wisconsinites save if we drove ultra-efficient cars that traveled 60 miles per gallon, instead of the current 26.4 mpg average?

After crunching the numbers, Alex came up with an answer: A cool $4.7 million. That would be enough to put a lot more turkeys and pumpkin pies on holiday tables.

And that’s just one more reason—along with our desire to help get Wisconsin off oil and reduce our state’s carbon footprint—that Wisconsin Environment is joining the members of our national federation, other environmental advocates, and nine governors in calling for new government rules that will ensure that by 2025 the average car sold in the United States will go 60 miles on a gallon of gas.

After 14 states decided to adopt clean cars standards over the last decade, the Obama administration raised current standards to 33 miles per gallon by 2016. Now it’s time to take the next step.
In November, the future of high-speed rail in Wisconsin—and the environmental benefits and thousands of jobs and $810 million in federal funding it would bring—was thrown into jeopardy when Scott Walker, who had been openly hostile to the project on the campaign trail, was elected governor. We ramped up the pressure on Gov. Walker, in just two days getting more than 3,000 Wisconsinites to sign our petition calling on him to reverse his plans to derail the train.

From all around the state, it became clear that Wisconsinites overwhelmingly supported the rail project. For decades, we’ve needed to improve our transportation infrastructure to meet growing demand, address our oil dependence and cut global warming pollution. But just as we were about to take a major step forward, Gov. Walker turned it down. And in December, the Obama administration announced that Wisconsin’s $810 million would be awarded instead to states who would welcome rail, sending the money and the jobs to Illinois, California and several other states. We called on Walker to do the right thing, instead of just supporting the road-building industry with more of the same—but unfortunately, Wisconsin missed out.