

Minnesota Conservation Federation

Executive Director Report

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Welcome to the Minnesota Chapter of The Wildlife Society!

I am sorry I cannot be there with you in person, just too much action in St. Paul! Thanks to Dr. Bill Faber for delivering this report for me.

The November 2016 election has brought about much change and that change is being further defined each day—both in Washington, DC and in St. Paul, MN.

At the federal level, President Trump has made his selections for key Secretary's to run the federal agencies of the country. In addition to the Secretary selections, that require Senate approval, President Trump has hundreds of key positions to fill in the Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and other key federal agencies. The NWF has taken a very strong stand on protecting public lands and Department of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has heard the concerns. The NWF has gone to floor in opposition of Scott Pruitt to serve as the next EPA Director. That vote is expected this week. With this new administration, defense will be the strategy of the day and maybe the next four years, to protect national parks, national monuments, and the natural treasures of this great country!

At the state level the Republicans increased their numbers in the House (75-57) and took control of the Senate (34-33). With the departure from the legislature of Tom Hackbarth and Denny McNamara, new House chairs of the Natural Resources Policy and Finance Committees were guaranteed. Rep. Dan Fabian (R-Roseau) was elected by his fellow caucus members to chair the Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Finance Committee. Rep. Chris Swedzinski (R-Ghent) will chair the subcommittee on Mining, Forestry, and Tourism.

In the Senate, Senator Bill Ingebrigtsen (R-Alexandria) is chairing the Environment and Natural Resources Finance Committee and Senator Carrie Ruud (R-Breezy Point) heads up the Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Legacy Finance Committee.

The new legislative session began on January 3 and must end by May 22.

These are key committees to the MCF due to the fact they hear all bills on habitat, shooting range funding, Lessard-Sams dollars, and put the entire budget together for the DNR, BWSR, and MPCA. We will be setting up meetings with these legislators, sharing our resolutions with them, and begin to work on natural resource, habitat, conservation, and environmental issues of the session.

At our annual meeting in September and at our quarterly meeting in December the MCF discussed and passed **resolutions** dealing with:

1. The need for the a world class shooting range facility in the Twin Cities metro area.
2. The need for the state to do more regarding cleaning up impaired waters.
3. The need to fully fund the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) to provide and protect valuable habit for wildlife and pollinators.
4. The need for the state to do more regarding controlling greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning power plants and automobiles.
5. Urge the USFWS/DNR to develop a 15-year restoration program for white pelicans and common loons using more of the Gulf oil spill monies from BP.
6. Urge Congress to support the Recovering America's Wildlife Act of 2016 funded by the dedication of the current charges on energy and mineral resource exploration.
7. Support policy that does not charge back drainage ditch benefits to conservation lands but continues to charge back drainage ditch benefits to other lands affected by the drainage ditch improvements or repairs.
8. Support DNR angler and hunter recruitment efforts to include youth and minorities to participate in the great out-of-doors.

These eight resolutions were packaged with a copy letter from the MCF and delivered to all 201 legislators in early January.

2017 Legislative Concerns & Interest:

The 2017 legislative session started off early with several anti-DNR, less public land purchases, anti-rulemaking, and less regulations on pipeline siting, and energy facility siting bills. They include:

1. **Buffers:** First out was the repeal the new buffer law that the Governor and others have worked hard on over the past two years. HF167 (Green) would outright repeal the law and the effort to buffer lakes, rivers, streams, and public water ditches. The governor gave away the private ditch coverage of the new law in 2015. The 16 and ½ foot ditch buffer law had been on the books since the 1920's but not enforced. Enforcement will be the key to the buffer law—if it survives. Counties must be paid a pretty penny to do the job they are supposed to be doing now! The county boards, county organizations, and the county attorneys see this new law as a way to get more state money into their county. There is some talk/support to delay the enforcement part of the new law until the money issue is sorted out. The MCF is supporting limited changes in the buffer law to get it implemented and enforced. This cost the taxpayers money! The Senate is working on a tax bill that would provide ongoing implementation money to the counties if they agree to administer the buffer law.

2. **Wetlands:** The Wetlands Conservation Act has been on the books since 1991. The goal is no net loss of wetlands in the state. In 1996 the legislature, based on complaining by the local road authorities, established the Local Road Wetland Replacement Program, and allowed the BWSR to establish Wetland Bank Service Areas that cover the entire state and allow regions to buy, sell, and trade wetland conservation credits for road improvements. Historically these banks have been provided money through bonding dollars. However, without a bonding bill in 2016, four of the ten banks are bankrupt! The Governor has provided \$5.1 million in general funds to reopen the doors of these banks and another \$10 million in bonding dollars to provide two years of wetland bank funding.
However, two sets of bills have been introduced and are alive and moving. HF431 (Fabian) and SF371 (Ingebrigtsen) would appropriate the \$5 million needed to reopen the banks and allow for counties to do roadwork in construction year 2017. HF434 (Fabian) and SF316 (Ingebrigtsen) would relax the wetland rule that prefers to replace wetlands in the same one of the 10 major watersheds where the impact occurs. It would also change the migration law/rule to allow ¼ acre de minimis into the local road program. This has never existed before and could result in hundreds of acres of wetlands not being migrated anywhere anytime when local roads are involved. The MCF is supporting the full funding of the Wetland Road Replacement Program but not the proposed changes in the policy area.
3. **Outdoor Heritage Bill for 2017:** HF 710 (Uglen) and SF262 (Ingebrigtsen) would appropriate \$104 million in Lessard-Sams dollars for the outdoor heritage portion of the bill. There are 33 projects funded in the bill! The Clean Water Legacy two-year appropriation is estimated to be over \$200 million and the third leg of the stool—for parks, trails, culture, history—is expected to be around \$100 million. However, bill HF586 (Drazkowski) would change the outdoor heritage selection process to require the total set aside for the project cost to cover the cost of PILT payments to the counties, township, and schools of most public land in counties. There is a bill HF143 (Green) that calls for no net gain in public lands. Green also has a bill HF698 that calls for constitutional amendment to replace the current distribution of Lessard-Sams dollars to fund transportation projects.
4. **Elimination of DNR/MPCA Rulemaking:** Several bills have been introduced that would move most of the rulemaking authority away from the agencies and force the rules back through the state legislature. One bill HF256 (Green) would prohibit the DNR from doing any rulemaking regarding the use of lead shot.
5. **Clean Water/Impaired Water List:** HF766 (Swedzinski) and SF672 (Ruud) would make MPCA decisions on impaired water listing more contentious, encourage challenges, and litigation.

I could go on and on about the number of “bad” bills that the conservation and environmental community are concerned about and fighting. I haven’t even gotten into the alternative energy turn backs (Clean Coal, Natural Gas to produce electricity). I wanted to share the agenda for the Monday MEP meeting just to provide a partial list of the negative bills.

Playing defense all the time makes it difficult to work on MCF positive priorities. We are, however, moving forward with a bill that would setup a third-party selection process to determine a site for an **Olympic type shooting range facility** that could be used for the state high school tournament, training facilities for law enforcement, as well as regional, state, and international shooting tournaments. Think of it like the Blaine soccer complex. Once we find a site or sites we can go back to the legislature and ask for bonding dollars to buy land or work with a private party that may be interested in building and/or running a world class shooting range facility.

Another issue the MCF has joined into is funding of the **St. Louis River AOC Clean Water Campaign**. This legislation and funding would provide a perfect match of Minnesota and federal funds to clean up the St. Louis River. MPCA has requested \$25.4 million in bonding dollars and would be matched up with \$47.2 million in Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funds to cleanup polluted riverbed sediment and industrial waste from the St. Louis River estuary.

The MCF has also taken a stakeholder leadership role for the proposed DNR Game and Fish License Fee increases as proposed by the Governor in his budget. The current projection has the Game and Fish Fund dipping into the red sometime in 2019. Other license fee accounts, like AIS, go red in 2018. The license fee increases include game and fish, AIS, all-terrain vehicles, cross country ski, snowmobile, and water recreation. As you already know we have 600,000 hunters and 1.5 million anglers currently purchasing licenses. The demographics and trendlines for license purchases do not look good into the future. We are working with Trout Unlimited and others to draft a letter of support for license fee increases for game and fish and AIS. We are also asking the legislature to match these license fee increases dollar-for-dollar with general funds. As we all know, the natural resources of our state are enjoyed by all citizens of Minnesota and need not be paid only by the angler and hunter. We are working closely with the DNR on this very tough sell at the state capitol.

MCF serving on DNR Deer Management Plan: The MCF was asked to serve on the twenty member Minnesota Deer Management Plan Advisory Committee. The charge to the committee by the Legislative Auditor and the State Legislature is to pull together all the deer management strategies and practices and if possible come up with statewide recommendations for deer management. With the outbreak of CWD (chronic wasting disease) this fall in southeastern Minnesota, the job just got a bit more important and difficult. MCF member, the Bluffland Whitetails Association, will also serve on the committee. The first meeting was held on December 13 at DNR/St. Paul. The second meeting was held on January 18 in Sauk Rapids. Jerome Kahl, president of the Rice Sportsmen's Club served as my alternate at that meeting. As you well know the legislative session keeps me close to the State Capitol. Be sure to stop by and visit our Capitol. It is beautiful!

MCF Youth Conservation Leadership Corp: The new MCF Youth Conservation Leadership Corp is halfway through its first year! Our first class are the young conservation leaders of the future! Ten students are meeting about every two months over the weekend in Inver Grove Heights. Elsa Litecky has organized this new program for the MCF. It is modeled after the Wisconsin program. The attendees have organized into teams and have developed MCF-type resolutions on pollinators, renewable energy, and the impact of climate change on Northern Forests. The teams will be presenting their resolutions at our quarterly meetings in March and June. One or more of the resolutions may be referred to the NWF for their resolution review process, ending up at the national convention in Washington State in June.

Membership Recruitment Efforts: The MCF represents around 40 sportsmens clubs around the state. We also represent individuals, families, and lifetime members. We are running ads in the Outdoor News to drive readers to our website to see what we are all about—from advocacy on outdoor issues, to education (Walk on the Wildside magazine for 5-6 graders), to our new youth conservation leadership efforts. This is what the MCF is all about. We believe that if folks go to our website and check us out they will strongly consider individual membership (\$25-\$100 range) and join our efforts. It is a tax-deductible contribution and is a wise smart investment! Tell your friends and family to join us!

I would personally like to thank the Minnesota Chapter of The Wildlife Society for its continued active membership in the MCF. We pride ourselves in basing our policy and funding advocacy positions on “good science” and the TWS as always provided that expertise, experience, and backgrounding! Thank you!

If you have any questions or comments about the MCF’s resolutions, youth emphasis, or membership recruitment efforts please contact me directly at gary@capitolconnections.com or call 651-293-9295. Get out and enjoy the winter!