

Concerns of the Rock River Coalition Board concerning the 2015-17 State Budget

March 13, 2015

Dear Rock River Coalition member,

As a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, the Rock River Coalition works to build alliances and consensus among all stakeholders in the region to protect the watershed. Every so often, though, proposed changes in policy or funding directly affect our mission and our ability to protect and improve the Rock River Basin. In our review of Governor Walker's proposed state budget for 2015-2017, we found several changes that will likely have a substantial negative effect on the basin and its water quality. We encourage you to learn more about the proposed changes and to ask your representatives to minimize their impacts.

Here are our top concerns:

1. Consolidating control in the DNR Secretary (removing authority from the Natural Resources Board)

The budget removes the authority of the Natural Resources Board to govern the DNR and consolidates power under the DNR Secretary, who is a political appointee. This change will substantially reduce our local community's voice in DNR oversight and rule-making and will reverse an almost 100-year-old tradition of a community voice in conservation. It will greatly reduce our capacity to control our basin's own destiny.

(Source: [Senate Bill 21](#) p. 38, [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#))

2. Moratorium on Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program land purchases

By limiting spending, the budget would place an effective moratorium on Stewardship Program spending until at least 2028 (past when current authorization for the Program ends in 2020). Our basin has greatly benefitted from Program purchases, including Korth Park where we've held our annual meeting in the past. Without the program, the DNR and local partners will have no flexibility in increasing recreational and hunting opportunities and protecting sensitive lands within our basin.

(Sources: [Senate Bill 21](#) p. 39, [Capital Time article](#))

3. Eliminating funding for non-profit organization and environmental education grants

The budget eliminates \$1.4 million in capacity-building grant programs that the Rock River Coalition and similar organizations have relied upon to do our work and provide resources to volunteers. These grants allow the DNR and the state to accomplish considerable conservation work, such as our stream monitoring program, at low cost. Specifically, these cuts would eliminate state funding for the Ice Age Trail which has a significant stretch through our basin and eliminate the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (WEEB) and the grants they provide. These programs are effective and cost-efficient ways for the state and DNR to achieve conservation goals and should be maintained.

(Sources: [Senate Bill 21](#) p. 39, [DNR Budget Recommendation](#), p. 20)

4. Reduced funding and staff for water quality programs

The budget reduces funding for staff to county Land and Water Conservation Departments by \$815,000 per year and reduces funding for conservation practices by \$250,000 per year. Both cuts would negatively impact the Rock River Recovery effort and our ability to reduce nonpoint source pollution to our waters.

(Source: [Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters](#))

5. Reductions in DNR scientific staff

The proposed budget cuts 66 DNR positions, 18 of which come from the Bureau of Science Services and account for one-third of its staff. Our board works regularly with DNR staff and scientists and has witnessed the growing challenge of DNR employees in accomplishing their jobs. We see these position cuts as a direct attempt to weaken DNR's ability to carry out the laws that protect our state's land and waters.

(Sources: [Senate Bill 21](#) p. 39, [DNR Budget Recommendation](#), p. 23, [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#))

As a board, we believe these budget and policy changes do not reflect the best interests and values of our members and the citizens of the Rock River Basin. Please take the time to review these proposed changes, reach your own conclusions on their impacts to the Basin, and contact your representatives to share your views.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors
Rock River Coalition