

## Minnesota Association of Conservation Professionals



*An independent association of current or former resource or conservation professionals whose mission is to promote science-based stewardship of natural resources including air, water, land, native plants, fish, and wildlife and to support aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems*

8 April 2010

Senator Satveer S Chaudhary, Chair  
Environment and Natural Resources Committee  
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Capitol Building, Room 205  
St. Paul, MN 55155-1606

Dear Sen. Chaudhary:

On behalf of the Minnesota Association of Conservation Professionals (MACP), I am writing to ask for your support. We advocate legislation that maintains, if not increases, the human resource capacity of Natural Resource organizations and agencies so that the goals outlined by the Legacy Amendment and other statewide conservation plans are met. The MACP is an alliance of natural resource professionals employed by state and local governments and non-governmental conservation organizations. Due to our professional affiliations, our members are uniquely qualified to assess the needs for effective delivery of conservation in Minnesota.

As you are well aware, in the midst of one of the worst recessions in recent memory, Minnesotans overwhelmingly voted to raise their taxes to better protect Minnesota's natural outdoor heritage. Minnesotans recognized that current efforts weren't keeping up with damage to prairies, forests, wetlands, lakes and streams. The voters, acting on a disturbing trend of disproportionate cuts to environmental and conservation funding, found it necessary for the constitution to articulate the importance of conservation and to protect our outdoor heritage. Accordingly, Minnesotans entrusted their tax dollars to our legislators, Governor, conservation organizations and citizen groups so they could work together to ensure that these monies are used efficiently and effectively to protect, enhance, and restore fish and wildlife habitats. Furthermore, many of these resources are held within the public's trust, and common law has long held that it is the responsibility of government to be its guardian. We must ensure that state and local governments are supported and able to carry out their obligations that will come with Legacy Amendment projects and acquisitions.

At our recent annual meeting, representatives from the LSOHC, LCCMR, Minnesota Environmental Partnership, Green Corridor Legacy Initiative, and Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts all agreed that one of the biggest threats to accomplishing the goals of the legacy amendment is the shortage of human resource capacity due to state and local budget cuts and amendment dollars

supplanting depleted budgets. Increased human resource capacity at state agencies and local governments will be needed to:

- Consult on projects and acquisitions, review proposals and permit applications, and enforce compliance of projects and acquisitions to state rules, statutes, and local ordinances.
- Evaluate and monitor restorations and enhancements to see that they indeed lead to habitat gains over the long-term.
- Manage information and data in a central location to facilitate better communication and information sharing, and minimize redundancy of efforts.
- Maintain improvements to habitats (e.g., water level regulation, prescribed burning, forest thinning, storm water regulation)
- Regulate and enforce activities to ensure that habitats remain protected, enhanced, or restored.

We recommend the following policies to increase (or at least minimize further losses in) human resource capacity at state and local natural resource agencies.

- 1. Support an increase in fishing license fees commensurate with inflation since fees were last increased a decade ago. Index fishing and hunting license fees to inflation with a regular schedule of increases.**

Funding losses along with rising costs, due in part to inflation, threaten the delivery of fish and wildlife conservation and management. DNR Divisions of Fish and Wildlife, Ecological Resources and Waters are currently managing numerous vacancies due to operating budget shortfalls. Paradoxically, funding for conservation is seeing a large surge due to passage of the Legacy Amendment while public-sector professional natural resource jobs are being lost. With fewer staff to administer, manage, and evaluate clean water and habitat amendment projects, outcomes will not be delivered efficiently, if at all. With regards to a fishing license increase, we advocate that new revenues from license sales go to support new professional and technical positions for habitat projects, research, and monitoring, rather than increased fish stocking.

- 2. In addressing state budget shortfalls, maintain fairness in cuts to general fund operating budgets of natural resource and conservation agencies and programs by ensuring that they are proportional to cuts in other sectors of the budget.**

Conservation funding is often first to be cut during economic recessions and last to be restored during economic recoveries, thus leading to long-term erosion in investment. Indeed, the proportion of the general fund devoted to environmental and conservation funding has decreased by 50% since 1991. In these difficult economic times when we are struggling to provide care for our most vulnerable citizens, we believe that all options should be on the table when considering where general fund investments should be allocated. However, we should

remember that the healthy air, waters, and lands, as well as access to the outdoors, are beneficial to both human and economic health. We advocate for fairness with cuts (if any) that are proportionate to cuts from other sectors of the State's general fund.

**3. Protect the integrity of funds dedicated to conservation**

We are concerned about past and present actions of the Legislature and Governor to raid dedicated natural resource accounts to plug holes in the General Fund during tough economic times (e.g., "Lottery-in-Lieu," "Future Resources Fund," "Environmental Fund," "Payment-in-Lieu-of-Taxation," "Water Recreation Account," among others). Raiding these funds will have cascading effects on statewide conservation and natural resource protection programs, including protection efforts associated with the LSOHC. Furthermore, conservation programs will see lower support from bonding than in the recent past. The net effect of these losses is a higher probability that statewide conservation objectives will be unmet and amendment funds will supplant conservation activities that were once supported by other dedicated funds, which the constitutional language explicitly prohibits.

**4. Ensure that institutional capacity to maintain, manage and evaluate outcomes of clean water and habitat projects keeps pace with project funding.**

Many projects have been and will be carried out by private or non-profit entities, but in keeping with the public trust, public natural resources agencies will ultimately be called upon to manage, maintain and monitor these projects over the long run. Without a commensurate increase in permanent professional natural resource staff at state or local governments to manage improvements to habitats over the long-term, gains from these projects will be short-lived.

Thank you for considering our concerns. The MACP looks forward to working with the Legislature and Conservation Community to realize the potential of the Legacy Amendment and deliver on its conservation mandates.

Sincerely,

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