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Tuesday, September 13, 2011

The Honorable Jeffery Mursau
Chair, Assembly Natural Resources Committee
Room 18 North, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

RE: Assembly Bill 158 relating to voting at meetings of the Conservation Congress

Dear Chair Mursau and members of the Assembly Natural Resources Committee:

The Conservation Congress would like to express our opposition to Assembly Bill 158 relating to the voting by non-residents at Conservation Congress meetings.

Persons voting in the delegate elections must already provide proof that they are residents of the county in which they are voting. This requirement is outlined in the WCC Code of Procedures (VII.B.10). This is done to ensure that the delegates being elected have been voted into their seat by the citizens they will represent. Writing this into statute is unnecessary since it is already in practice by the Conservation Congress.

To be fiscally responsible, the Conservation Congress Annual County Meetings are held in conjunction with the Department of Natural Resources Spring Fish and Wildlife Rules Hearings. As public hearings, they are open to the public for attendance and participation regardless of residency. The DNR does not require individuals to prove residency, and is required to take comments and input from anyone in attendance. Neither the DNR nor the WCC can legally prohibit people from coming to an open, public meeting. And since the DNR vote on proposed rule hearings is done on the same ballot that the WCC uses for advisory questions, it would be impractical for this volunteer organization to try to monitor who is voting on what questions. Using separate ballots would cost the DNR and the WCC a significant amount of money for minimal results.

There is a long tradition of former Wisconsinites who have moved away, returning to Wisconsin to hunt, fish, or trap with relatives and friends. These people have grown up hunting and fishing Wisconsin's natural resources, and many know intimately the lakes and lands they use. While the natural resources of Wisconsin belong to the citizens of Wisconsin, should these persons who purchase non-resident licenses and contribute to Wisconsin's economy, not have a chance to voice their opinion in a non-binding advisory vote? Students attending college from out-of-state may not be residents, but many of them live in Wisconsin and participate in our hunting and fishing seasons. This bill would not allow them to have a voice on WCC non-binding advisory questions. In addition, there are many non-residents who own land in Wisconsin and pay taxes on their land that they may primarily own for the purpose of hunting. These landowners, while they may not be residents of Wisconsin, contribute to Wisconsin's economy and have a large stake in the management on our natural resources.

People that want to vote on the advisory questions, must attend a Spring Hearing (7:00 pm on the first Monday in April in each county of the state). In this age of so many responsibilities, high gas prices, and numerous demands on our time, one would really have to care deeply about Wisconsin's natural resources to travel from out-of-state to participate in a non-binding vote on an advisory question.

Finally, the Conservation Congress is an advisory body to the Natural Resources Board. The votes taken at the spring meetings are non-binding. While it is an extremely valuable tool for the department and the NRB to gather input from the public, they do not have to make recommendations based solely on the Spring Hearing vote. These meetings are used to get a pulse on how those who use Wisconsin's natural resources feel about possible changes to rules or laws. While those are primarily Wisconsin residents, there are some non-residents who may wish to comment.

Since we already require those who wish to vote for delegates to prove their residency, we know that most of the people who attend the Spring Hearings are Wisconsin residents. There is not an onslaught of non-residents rushing the borders to vote in

Wisconsin's unique non-binding Spring Hearings. However, this bill would likely penalize Wisconsin citizens who attend the Spring Hearings by dismissing the votes of the entire county if a non-resident attended and voted at the public meeting. Should the possible inclusion of a minimal number of non-residents that take the time and initiative to voice an opinion on the management of Wisconsin's natural resources invalidate the non-binding vote of the entire county? This bill seems to be an overreaction to a "problem" that isn't really a problem.

Sincerely,

Rob Bohmann, WCC Chair

As established by Wisconsin State Statutes, the Wisconsin Conservation Congress is officially recognized as the only natural resources advisory body in the state where citizens elect delegates to represent their interests on natural resources issues on a local and statewide level to the Natural Resources Board and the Department of Natural Resources. Their mission is to represent the citizens of Wisconsin by working with the Natural Resources Board and the Department of Natural Resources to effectively manage Wisconsin's greatest asset, our abundant natural resources, for present and future generations to enjoy.