

Wetlands Destruction Bill Targets Water, Wildlife

Climate refugees are people who were forced to leave their homes because of climate change and the negative environmental effects that impacted their communities.

Thankfully, this isn't a huge issue in Wisconsin — yet. Scott Walker and the Republicans who control the state Legislature are pushing the Wetlands Destruction Bill (AB 547), which, if passed, would threaten about a million acres of functional Wisconsin wetlands by allowing rich developers to fill them. In doing so, this could create climate refugees right here in Wisconsin after the next big flood season.

These wetlands currently provide an important habitat for Wisconsin wildlife, provide clean water to our communities and help mitigate severe flooding. With their destruction, we risk experiencing the flooding disasters that have occurred in Florida, Texas and countless other areas.

Together, we can and must stop the Wetlands Destruction Bill and make sure Wisconsin doesn't end up next on that list.

So where did the Wetlands Destruction Bill come from?

Remember that terrible \$3 billion giveaway to Foxconn? This is just one more of the many negative consequences that “deal” had on our state. Most people are familiar with the fiscal part of that con-job, but there was also a significant environmental component to it that removed the environmental protections of wetlands at the Foxconn site. The company can build on any wetlands it likes, without even determining the environmental impact such construction might cause.

Now that the precedent has been set, Walker and the Wisconsin Republicans (more specifically those who pay for their campaigns) decided to expand the practice statewide. This would allow developers to fill in all non-federal wetlands (wetlands that do not have direct or permanent surface water connections to a navigable stream or lake) and artificial wetlands statewide. This is another in a series of long-term environmental attacks that sacrifice our environmental security so that certain campaign donors can be appeased.

This is not a popular policy, and Republicans want it passed quickly and secretly. In the Assembly, it was assigned to the Licensing Reform Committee, a committee known for giving short notice and fast tracking controversial items. That speaks volumes about what's going on. The reason this is so unpopular is that it could do such incredible and irreparable harm to our state.

In fact, this legislative effort comes with such a high ecological risk that many environmental groups are lobbying against it, including: Clean Wisconsin, Midwest Environmental Advocates, the Nature Conservancy-Wisconsin Chapter, River Alliance of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Association of Lakes Inc., Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association Inc., Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters, Wisconsin Wetlands Assoc., the Wisconsin Conservation Congress and Gathering Waters.

Because they are a valuable habitat for plants and animals, wetlands are also prime grounds for Wisconsin's hunters and fishers. As a result, there is widespread opposition to this bill from the sporting community: Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, Wisconsin Trappers Association, Wisconsin Wildlife Association, and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Those who care about our environment, love our sporting heritage and/or have been impacted by flooding in Wisconsin know the dangers this bill poses and are already speaking out against it.

The Wetlands Destruction Bill is scheduled to get a public hearing on Dec. 21. So let's be ready. Our environment is in grave danger. Shady, powerful corporations and interest groups that value their profits over our environment, sporting heritage, and flood mitigation want to take away a huge amount of our existing functional wetlands. We cannot afford to lose our vital ecosystems to morally bankrupt corporate greed. Let's work together and defeat the Wetlands Destruction Bill.

Wisconsin State Representative Jonathan Brostoff represents Wisconsin's 19th Assembly District – which includes Milwaukee's east side, downtown, Riverwest, and Bay View.