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Earth Day Reminds Us That We Must Protect Wisconsin's Environment

By Rep. Gary Hebl

Earth Day is celebrated around the globe this week. Created with the help of former Wisconsin Senator and Governor Gaylord Nelson, it serves as a reminder of the importance of the environment, and that we must do what is necessary to give future generations a healthy planet.

Wisconsin has an incredible environmental legacy. In addition to Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin can also claim Aldo Leopold and John Muir as state environmental giants. Leopold, a professor at UW Madison, was considered the father of wildlife management and remains an enormous influence in environmentalism and conservation. Muir's family emigrated from Scotland to Wisconsin, where he grew up and went to college. Muir went on to found the Sierra Club, an environmental preservation group.

Unfortunately, this legacy is in a precarious position.

Several years ago, the Republican-controlled legislature passed a law that relaxed mining regulations in Wisconsin. The law served one purpose: to entice Gogebic Taconite, an iron-ore mining company, to set up shop in Wisconsin. Though the majority party claimed it would add numerous jobs and benefit our state, they ignored both the impact the mine would have on our environment and the desire of local tribes.

The Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians indicated their staunch opposition to the proposed mine, stating that it could not be developed without compromising the watershed which feeds into North American's largest fresh-water lake, Lake Superior. The Bad River Band made it clear that their livelihood, their lives, and their spirituality relied heavily on protecting water.

Despite bipartisan opposition, the majority party opened the door to allow companies to come into our state and destroy our pristine lands for one single out-of-state group. Then, in March 2015, Gogebic withdrew their preapplication notice for a proposed mine. Yet the law remains on the books.

Recently, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource's Conservation Congress completed their 72-county spring hearing tour of Wisconsin. In these hearings, they received citizen input on mining regulations. In 62 of our 72 counties, a majority of Wisconsin citizens expressed that they want the mining law repealed. In a district-wide legislative survey I recently sent to my constituents, more than 70% of respondents say they would like to see the mining law repealed. A significant majority of Wisconsin's residents are in favor of stronger environmental standards. My hope is that the Republican majorities in the Assembly and the Senate see this and will work with me and my colleagues to restore our previous environmental protections.

I opposed the environmental rollbacks when they were first introduced, and I still stand against them. Last fall I circulated a new bill that would restore our stronger environmental standards. The legislative majority never should have abandoned our state's environmental legacy or have been willing to sacrifice our incredible natural resources for a single mining company. We must continue to pass legislation with our future generations in mind, and make sure that we carry forward the legacy of Wisconsin's own conservation champions John Muir, Gaylord Nelson, and Aldo Leopold.

Rep. Gary Hebl represents the 46th Assembly District, which includes the cities of Sun Prairie and Stoughton, the village of Cottage Grove, and the townships of Cottage Grove, Dunkirk, Pleasant Springs, and Sun Prairie.

Contact Rep. Hebl with any questions or concerns you may have at (608) 266-7678 or via email at Rep.Hebl@legis.wi.gov.

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