

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONSERVATION FUNDING IN ILLINOIS: CHANGING THE DEBATE

**REPORT OF THE CONSERVATION FUNDING COMMITTEE of the
NATURAL RESOURCES ADVISORY BOARD to the
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES and
CONSERVATION CONGRESS**

October 5, 2009

Illinois needs a stable, adequate, long-term funding source for conservation. To accomplish this, it is time to engage new partners and fundamentally change the debate on conservation to one of preserving the future of our state while seizing advantages in the global economy.

CONSERVATION IS THE FOUNDATION

Conservation can drive economic development. Outdoor recreation spending is a major economic development engine. Conservation can be an effective way to drive regional development and increase property values. Environmental restoration of polluted areas such as around the Great Lakes can be a huge engine for economic growth.

Conservation can assure many ecosystem services including adequate water supplies, habitat and biodiversity, and can lessen the impact of flooding and other natural disasters. Natural resources can be part of the solution to climate change. And conservation can save money by making development more efficient and benefit communities by preserving farmland.

Conservation can enhance public health and children's well-being, by fighting obesity and inactivity and the diseases associated with them. Natural habitats have also been shown to improve air quality, one factor in the increasing childhood asthma epidemic. Richard Louv, in his groundbreaking book *Last Child in the Woods*, cites the growing body of research that links mental, physical and spiritual health directly to association with nature.

Swift action is urgently needed to preserve natural resources. Climate change is stressing our natural resources – and our agriculture, our cities, our health and our economy. Children are more disconnected from nature than ever. Natural History study is dwindling in higher education. Urbanization steals conservation opportunities. The “old model” of funding conservation based on fees charged for hunting and fishing will no longer fill the need due to economic, demographic and cultural changes.

Funding must be stable, adequate and long term. Land costs more in Illinois. Stewardship and defense of natural resources is a long-term – and increasing – commitment. Only a tiny percentage of land in Illinois is publicly owned and programs for private land must be part of the solution too.

We are behind in meeting the needs. With only 1% of land protected for future generations, Illinois ranks behind all other Midwest states except Iowa in conservation and recreation areas as a percent of state land. Illinois has lost 99.9% of its original prairie. Less than 10% of natural wetlands remain. While there is an estimated \$3 billion need to protect open space according to

the 2004 SCORP, annual state open space spending per capita in Illinois from 1999 to 2004 (years for which comparable data is available through TPL) was \$2.67, placing it far behind states such as Florida (\$24.10), Maryland (20.87) and New Jersey (\$19.47).

Opportunities now are immense. Land prices are lower. People recognize the benefits of conservation. Illinois laid the groundwork for targeted land acquisition through major planning efforts such as the nationally-acclaimed Wildlife Action Plan. Constituents are mobilizing around conservation. A new Governor recognizes conservation as a priority. While the state's fiscal situation is dire, new revenue sources may be enacted in the next few years.

Voters nationally and in Illinois consistently and strongly support conservation funding. Of forty state land conservation ballot measures in 20 states between 1996 and 2008, 34 (or 85%) were approved. A May 2009 shows that Illinois voters of all types strongly support spending more money to protect land and water despite their worries about the economy. A total of 79% of the voters surveyed voiced support for dedicating \$350 million in a state capital budget to conserve land and water.

Substantial state investment through a stable state revenue source is the foundation of a good state conservation program. Many other states have enacted bold approaches including dedicated bonds or taxes. (A list of funding source ideas submitted by the public during this Committee process is included as an appendix to the full report. No analysis of these suggestions has been made and no recommendation of a particular source is implied.)

Ingredients for state success include political leadership from the top, nonprofit partnerships and broad based public support. Illinois has a robust stable of land acquisition programs but funding is lacking. And the Department's fund balances, program and staffing have deteriorated almost to the point of no return. Fee increases are needed but can only be a short-term measure. The dire straits of the overall state budget situation limit options, demand creativity and commitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement a stable, adequate, long-term funding source for conservation in Illinois by creating fundamental new partnerships. Partners may include economic development, tourism, health care and public health, child welfare, education, agriculture, faith communities, job training advocates, culture and arts advocates, local government and business.
2. Develop a "master action plan" to create these partnerships, and to develop and test program and funding options. Different strategies will be needed to engage different partners. Consensus on what we as a state want to fund to meet our conservation challenges is needed. Work will also include researching potential funding mechanisms, their legal characteristics and limitations, potential dollar yield, political and public acceptance, and how they can be implemented. Agreement on a series of "policy screens" for different funding mechanisms would be helpful.
3. Adopt a radically broad approach to conservation as the foundation of economic development, education, health, livable cities and sustainable high-quality life for residents of Illinois.

4. Pursue short-term measures to enhance conservation programs and funding, that do not impede progress towards the long-term goal of stable long-term funding. These measures could include:

Take advantage of new funds available from any national climate change legislation that may pass by meeting all requirements.

Position the Department to take advantage of new carbon markets to the extent this does not interfere with the Department's work.

Pass SB1846, to increase some existing hunting and fishing fees and implements some new fees on IDNR regulatory activities,.

Implement fees that the IDNR can put in place with Administrative Rules. This would include fees for some non-consumptive recreational activities such as use of the parks.

Re-examine the Department's business practices to maximize other revenues consistent with mission. Actively show that the Department seeks to operate efficiently.

Use partnerships to leverage limited resources. Encourage conservation on private lands; pool resources in land acquisition; and facilitate "friends" organizations.

Seek federal funds for State programs, and educate private landowners and others about federal funds for conservation.

5. Commit many parties to carrying out pieces of the action plan. It cannot be done by or even led by government alone, or by any single constituent organization.

6. Commit the Department of Natural Resources to full, open transparent information exchange in its role as partner. Along with other parties, the Department must make it a priority to invest in this long-term partnership effort even in the face of immense daily challenges to carry out its mission with dwindling resources.

7. Recognize that this effort may take years. While many critical pieces of constituency-building and messaging are already in place in Illinois, this is likely more than a mere one or two year project. Short-term crises need to be addressed, but they cannot be allowed to derail the main effort.

8. Be ready with the arguments and the coalition in support of conservation when new revenues are put in place to help solve the State's overall fiscal crisis. Conservation must be at the table.