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Thursday, February 2, 2012

The Honorable Senator Neil Kedzie
Chair, Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee
Room 313 South
State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

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

Dear Chair Kedzie and Members of the Senate Natural Resources and Environment 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.

Unfortunately, the effect of AB-158 would not only be a logistical hurdle for the Conservation Congress in implementing its process, but could also serve as a tool for those who wish to challenge or discredit a statewide vote on a particular question. More specifically, the impact of a single non-resident vote tallied in any county would effectively disqualify the entire state's vote and render the question void.

The Conservation Congress County Meetings are held annually in conjunction with the Department of Natural Resources Spring Fish and Wildlife Rules Hearings. 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. As public hearings, they are open to the public for attendance and participation regardless of residency. The DNR is required by statute to take comments and input from anyone, including non-residents, in attendance. Neither the DNR nor the WCC can legally prohibit people from coming to an open, public meeting.

In addition, the Conservation Congress is an *advisory body* to the Natural Resources Board. That is, the votes tallied at the spring meetings are non-binding. While the Conservation Congress process is an extremely valuable tool for the department and the NRB to gather input from the public, they are not required 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 in attendance primarily are Wisconsin residents, there are some non-residents who may wish to comment.

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.

Lastly, but equally important, persons voting in the WCC 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. In addition, since the department vote on proposed rule hearings is typically done on the same ballot that the WCC uses for advisory questions, AB-158 would also result in significant additional costs to the Conservation Congress in order to supply two separate ballots. This appears to be both impractical and fiscally irresponsible for a change that would have minimal results.

Since we already require those who wish to vote for delegates to prove their residency, we also already 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 state 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 state? Instead, in this age of growing responsibilities, high gas prices, and numerous demands on our time, we would rather show our gratitude and appreciation to all those who care deeply about Wisconsin's natural resources, especially those who are willing to travel from out-of-state to participate in a non-binding vote on advisory questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rob Bohmann', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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.