

A DNR is born

Foam from detergents was an all-too-common sight on state waterways during the 1960s, such as this scene below the Wisconsin Dells dam on the Wisconsin River in April 1965. Soap suds forming during the spring runoff here create a perplexing situation for a fisherman.

DEAN TVEDT/DNR FILES

AGENCY EMERGED 50 YEARS AGO AFTER CONCERNS SPURRED ACTION, REORGANIZATION.

Andrea Zani

Not to oversimplify, but it might have been soap suds, of all things, that proved to be the biggest catalyst for environmental changes in the state during the 1960s — and what eventually led to the creation 50 years ago of the Department of Natural Resources.

To explain: Environmental concerns, especially regarding water quality, began bubbling up in Wisconsin in a big way in the early '60s, and nothing provided more of a visual example of the issues than, well, the bubbles themselves. Huge foamy piles of suds were not an uncommon sight on state streams and rivers, created by nondegradable detergents that at the time were released untreated into waterways.

A ban on “hard” detergents came in 1965, the first step in cleaning up the problem. That same year, with lakeside property owners’ support, Republican

legislator George Borg introduced a bill calling for one state agency to be responsible for maintaining clean water. A short time later, Gov. Warren Knowles, already known for his keen interest in protecting Wisconsin’s natural resources, called a special Conference on Water Resources Management.

The 600 experts, government officials and other leaders who took part in this bipartisan effort created the framework to guide the state’s approach not just to clean water, but to a variety of environmental issues moving forward. On many levels, the work went hand-in-



STABER W. REESE/DNR FILES

Warren Knowles was Republican governor of Wisconsin from 1965-71, a time of great progress in the state on issues of environmental concern and the era when the Department of Natural Resources was formed. An avid outdoorsman, Knowles — shown here on the South Branch Oconto River in 1966 — established the Governor’s Fishing Opener, which continues to celebrate the state’s fishing traditions.



hand with 1961's ORAP legislation — the Outdoor Recreation Act Program championed by then-Gov. Gaylord Nelson that generated conservation revenue with a penny-a-pack cigarette tax, most of which funded land acquisitions.

In 1966, a reimagined Department of Resource Development emerged to better complement the longstanding Wisconsin Conservation Department. A year later, Gov. Knowles signed the Water Pollution Control Act of 1967 and approved major funding for water cleanup efforts. More changes in the structure of state government also got underway that year following the formation of the Kellett Commission on Government Reorganization.

When dust from the Kellett Commission's work had settled and legislation it prompted was approved, the bottom line for environmental issues in the state was a merger of two agencies, the Conservation Department and Resource Development. Full of controversy at the time, the decision involved two steps.

Wisconsin's first Natural Resources Board included, seated from left: Russell G. Lynch, Wauwatosa, chairman; Herbert F. Behnke, Shawano, secretary; and Charles F. Smith, Wausau, vice-chairman. Standing from left: Gerard A. Rohlich, Madison; L.P. Voigt, DNR secretary; Arthur R. MacArthur, Janesville; Daniel K. Tyler, Phillips; and John M. Potter, Wisconsin Rapids.



First was to combine members from the Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the Resource Development Board into a new seven-member entity known as the Natural Resources Board. This board would guide the work of a new agency formed by the merger of the Conservation Department and Resource Development.

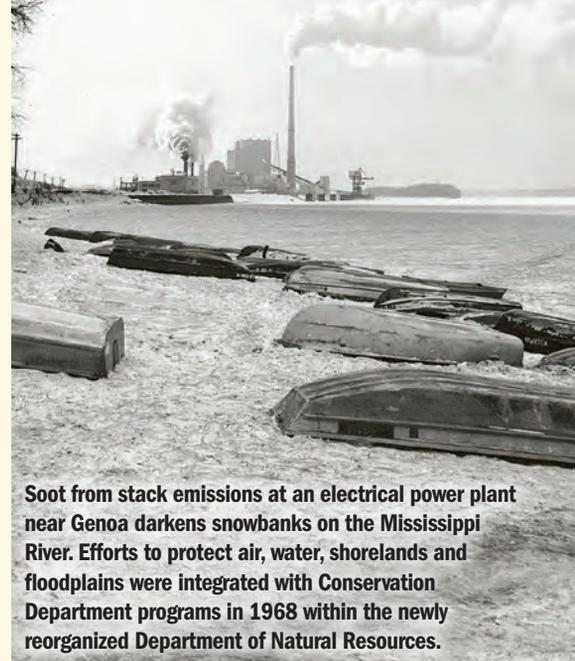
When the changes officially took place on July 1, 1968, the Department of Natural Resources was born.

What they said then

Fifty years ago, the Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin, precursor to this magazine, had plenty to say about the formation of the Natural Resources Board and DNR. The publication featured several pieces throughout the year addressing the changes brought on by the Kellett Commission as well as ORAP and the subsequent recommendations of an ORAP Task Force.

Understandably, it was a time of great excitement and anticipation, no doubt with plenty of trepidation thrown in the mix. How this new board and agency would function going forward was yet to be determined, though given the origins, methods and overall work ethic already in place, hopes were high.

As we look back now on a half-century of the NRB and DNR, it's worth revisiting some of what was written about the changes in real time. Let's head back to 1968 and the pages of the Conservation Bulletin, where we can check the pulse of the state Legislature's new creations with these excerpts.



Soot from stack emissions at an electrical power plant near Genoa darkens snowbanks on the Mississippi River. Efforts to protect air, water, shorelands and floodplains were integrated with Conservation Department programs in 1968 within the newly reorganized Department of Natural Resources.

STABER W. REESE/DNR FILES

Ready for the challenges ahead

Conservation Bulletin,
January-February 1968
By L.P. Voigt, DNR Secretary

By this time next year, I am sure we will be far along the "reorganization road" toward an efficient and effective Department of Natural Resources. While these are crucial times for conservation and management of natural resources as well as in other fields, I am hopeful for marked improvement through our new Board and Department and citizen interest and response.

When the U.S.A. passed the 200 million population mark the other day, it was a reminder of our new opportunities and people-related problems of the future. As land and water use pressures increase, so will intensity of the battle to preserve quality in our environment with open spaces, pollution control, conservancy zoning and better enforcement techniques.

At this moment, we face a severe challenge — but in the field of natural resource management that is nothing new. It has happened in the past and can be expected to happen even more often in the future.

Extensive powers and responsibilities delegated by the Legislature to the new Natural Resources Board make decisions of these seven members vitally important. They always must act with the future of all citizens at heart and without selfish motives or any direct control by private users of our natural resources. They must be accountable to the people at all times and welcome any public review of their actions.

Anyone who does anything constructive is subject to criticism by someone not favorable to the actions taken. Conservation of natural resources in Wisconsin is an action program — we have carried out many responsibilities assigned by the Legislature. Included among

DNR FILES



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A 1938 photo of Conservation Department personnel at the Trout Lake Forestry Headquarters includes some of the “fiery young idealists” referred to in a 1968 Conservation Bulletin editorial. Notables are (standing, second from left) Ph.D. biologist Edward Schneberger; (third from left) forester F.G. Wilson; (fourth from left) C.L. Harrington, namesake of Harrington State Park; (fourth from right) Barney Devine, who became chief warden in 1954; (far right) Harley MacKenzie, then director of the Conservation Department and namesake of the MacKenzie Center; and (front row, left) Ernie Swift, who also went on to lead the department.

these is the controversial mandate we have had for acquisition of lands for state parks and outdoor recreation areas, fish and other wildlife habitat preservation, and for protection of scenic beauty, natural areas, wild rivers and water areas from pollution.

While we may have done our job too energetically or in some cases without sufficient public communications, yet the record will show both an honest effort and significant results. Reports by the several action bureaus will tell that story on several hundred project areas. Acquisition must be continued in the future to complete projects as the first step for all-important restoration and management work already well underway in many areas.

Reorganization efforts to coordinate and integrate the two major divisions of the new DNR — Conservation and Resource Development — are well underway. With an anticipated biennial budget of about \$60 million and almost 1,500 permanent personnel located throughout the state, this is an enormous undertaking.

Besides the former Conservation Department’s program, it involves either expanded efforts in the fields of air and water pollution, shoreland and flood plain zoning, scenic beauty and scientific area concerns, comprehensive long-range natural resource protection and management planning, promotion of inter-agency cooperation on all levels of government, and enhanced enforcement duties with new powers through both legislation and administrative roles.

In 1867, Wisconsin’s first Forestry Commission reported to the Legislature on the condition of our forests. In this significant year of our Conservation Centennial, the Governor’s ORAP Task Force recommended doubling that effort with a highly desirable Outdoor Resources Action Plan.

The legislative act which will phase out our

nationally respected Conservation Commission and the Resource Development Board, formulating policies for the Division of Resource Development, will take effect on July 1, 1968. The new Natural Resources Board consisting of four of the former commissioners and three of the latter board members in staggered terms takes over completely on that date.

Conservation of natural resources always must be the pilgrimage goal for each of us and our firm determination to succeed will help decide mankind’s future destiny.

Respected traditions continue

Conservation Bulletin,

July-August 1968

Editorial: The Command Changes

The Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the Resource Development Board went out of existence July 1. Replacing these policy-makers is the Natural Resources Board, which now guides the entire new Department of Natural Resources.

Changes in policy, if any, can be expected to be moderate, in the nature of evolution dictated by needs. Because all members of the Natural Resources Board are former members of the Conservation Commission and the Resource Development Board, they understand their responsibilities and the problems involved and they are interested in obtaining smooth continuity of accomplishment.

There will, however, be changes in organization. This is essential to eliminate duplication, effect coordination and otherwise promote maximum efficiency when formerly separate agencies are welded together.

The Natural Resources Board has its history largely ahead and it will be chronicled as it develops. At this moment, it is appropriate to pay respect to the phased-out Conservation Commission and Resource Development Board.

The six-man commission was established in 1927 to reform abuses that had shown up in Wisconsin conservation, that were prevalent in other states and that have continued to this day in some quarters.

Fiery young idealists of the 1920s who fought to set up the commission can rest easy. Their creation performed well. No other state conservation policy-making unit achieved more constructive progress or earned more respect than did the Wisconsin Conservation Commission in the past 41 years.

The Resource Development Board, much younger than the Conservation Commission, performed creditably during its relatively brief history and laid much groundwork for its successor to build on.

Ideals of 1927 are with us yet, for the new Natural Resources Board is designed on the same principles as the commission and board it succeeds. It is an unpaid citizen board, its members serving overlapping terms to assure that programs will evolve in an orderly and waste-free manner.

In effect, the Conservation Commission and Resource Development Board live on in their successor.

Reorganization is complete

Conservation Bulletin,
September-October 1968

Back page: The board decides (formerly called “The commission decides”)

On July 1, the Natural Resources Board took over responsibility for natural resources programs in accord with law. Also, merger of Conservation and Resource Development into the Department of Natural Resources was completed.

Planning to effect the necessary reorganization was underway for a year. Primarily responsible was the board’s Reorganization Committee. Spadework to analyze needs, problems and possible solutions, and to come up with recommendations, was handled by an Intra-department Reorganization Committee appointed by Secretary L.P. Voigt.

The Natural Resources Board unanimously adopted a reorganization plan establishing six divisions. Eventually, there will be further reorganization affecting the field force, to implement the line-staff concept and to establish uniform districts.

These are the six divisions: Environmental Protection; Forestry and Recreation; Fish, Game and Enforcement; Tourism and Information; Services; Trust Lands and Investments. Two bureaus are operating under direct supervision of the department administrators rather than under divisions. They are Legal Services, and Planning and Aid Programs.

Responsibilities moving forward

Conservation Bulletin,
November-December 1968
By Thomas G. Frangos, Acting
Administrator, Division of
Environmental Protection

During the (1967) legislative session, the Kellett Bill, which reorganized all state agencies, became law. It merged the Conservation Department and the Department of Resource Development into a new Department of Natural Resources. In July 1968, Resource Development was redesignated the Division of Environmental Protection.

So much for history. What are this division's functions, and how does it operate? Briefly stated, its responsibilities include:

1. Maintaining safe domestic water supplies through supervision of public waterworks and private well drilling.
2. Controlling water pollution by requiring municipalities and industries to install approved waste treatment systems.
3. Protecting public rights and private property by flood control programs, dam inspections and investigations into applications for watercourse alterations before permits are issued.
4. Development of air quality standards and programs to protect against air contamination.
5. Control over proper disposal of garbage and trash through licensing of approved facilities.

As this brief summary indicates, the responsibilities of the division are still basically water-oriented. But air pollution and solid waste disposal programs are developing rapidly and will come in for increased attention soon.

The Legislature recognized that these forms of pollution are closely interrelated. An improperly located dump can cause pollution of surface or groundwater. Use of an incinerator may eliminate this problem but can cause pollution of the air. Water-spray filters can stop pollutants from going out the smokestack, but some means must then be found to remove these contaminants from the water.

Solution to any form of pollution must be weighed against their impact on the total environment. Thus the role of the division is, as its name states, to protect the environment — water, air and land. 60

Andrea Zani is an associate editor of Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine.



DEAN TVEDT/DNR FILES

In this 1969 photo, a UW-Madison laboratory technician tests a detergent sample for alkyl benzene sulfonate, known as a “hard” detergent for its resistance to biological degradation. ABS caused persistent foam in sewage treatment plants, streams and rivers.



JIM ESCALANTE/DNR FILES

The 1967 Kellett Bill that created the DNR recognized the interdependence of air, land and water. An improperly located dump, for example, could cause surface or groundwater pollution. Here, DNR environmental engineer Tim Krueger samples water at an industrial landfill in Menomonee Falls in 1979.



DEAN TVEDT/DNR FILES

Unregulated waste from a paper mill empties directly into the Wolf River near the Shawano dam in this 1959 photo. These and other growing environmental issues were a driving force in DNR's creation.



DEAN TVEDT/DNR FILES

Abandoned cars and illegal roadside dumps were a common sight in the 1960s. This 1968 photo was taken on U.S. Highway 12 near Lake Geneva.