



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Assembly Bill 693 Wednesday, Feb. 2, 2022

Thank you Chairman Mursau and committee members for holding a public hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 693, which provides up to \$5.6 million in authorized but unobligated Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funds to complete critical health- and safety-related water infrastructure projects at our high-demand state parks.

In Door County, we have five wonderful state parks that contribute greatly toward the county's nearly \$400 million tourism industry. In simple terms, our region would not have as many visitors as it does without our state parks. The same could be said about Wisconsin as a whole, which saw a more than 20 percent increase in guests over the past two years, for an annual total of 22 million.

That is why it is so important for us to take the necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of all who frequent our state parks by making much-needed water facility and infrastructure upgrades.

A person's well-being is obviously paramount, but we must also be cognizant of the fact that park attendance could suffer significantly if a water-related bacterial outbreak were to occur. Plus, visitors will also likely be put off by old and malfunctioning facilities, which increases the chance that they may never come back again.

AB 693 helps us reach the goal of having a robust and vibrant state park system by focusing on backlogged water infrastructure projects that guests rely on for having memorable experiences.

This effort began with 2017 Wisconsin Act 71, which passed with broad, bipartisan support and provided \$4.5 million for similar water infrastructure upgrades. Last session, we passed a similar bipartisan bill that allocated \$5.2 million.

Under this session's AB 693, up to \$5.6 million will go toward completing water infrastructure projects throughout our state parks, including new water lines, wells and water fountains.

The co-sponsorship memo contains a list of the proposed projects. They are located throughout the state and many of them are in the districts of committee members.

Clean water helps to ensure that our visitors have a positive experience at our state parks and that their health is being protected. It is imperative that we continue to maintain our infrastructure in a fiscally-responsible manner so our state parks can be enjoyed for generations to come. I believe AB 693 is key to making that vision become a reality.

I would like to thank Senator Cowles and his staff for all the work they put into this bill. I would also like to thank the committee members for listening to my testimony. I will now answer any questions if you have them.

STANDING COMMITTEES:

Natural Resources & Energy, Chair
Transportation & Local Government, Vice-Chair

ROBERT L. COWLES

Wisconsin State Senator
2nd Senate District

JOINT COMMITTEES:
Audit Committee, Co-Chair

Testimony on 2021 Assembly Bill 693

Senator Robert Cowles

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

February 2nd, 2022

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and Committee Members, for holding a hearing and allowing me to submit testimony on 2021 Assembly Bill 693. This bill uses authorized but unobligated Stewardship bonding to provide the funding needed to complete backlogged water infrastructure projects in our State Parks System.

Anyone who visits the Wisconsin State Park System knows that these are truly special places. But despite the enjoyment from some of our state's best opportunities for outdoor recreation, dilapidated infrastructure can create a lasting impression of our State Parks System that can be hard to break. Unfortunately, with hundreds, if not thousands of backlogged projects, there's far too many opportunities for these impressions to be made.

While many backlogged infrastructure projects in the State Park System are less urgent – with the backlog including some projects that are cosmetic – other rundown infrastructure, often decades old, can cause concern for human health and water quality. Building on the efforts from recent sessions, Assembly Bill 693 provides \$5.6 million in authorized but unobligated Stewardship bonding authority from the most recent fiscal year to complete necessary health and safety water infrastructure upgrades in our State Parks System.

In other words, the projects completed from this bill are at the highest risk of failure. Using already authorized Stewardship bonding authority from Fiscal Year 2020-21, which was not used in the budget's reauthorization, this funding extension allows us to complete some critical projects that will last for decades to come. While specific projects are not specified in the bill, through working with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), we would anticipate that the projects completed by Assembly Bill 693 would include:

1. About \$1.8 million for new water systems at beaches, campgrounds, and day-use areas such as shelters at Governor Dodge, Mirror Lake, Nelson Dewey, New Glarus Woods, Rib Mountain, Tower Hill and Wyalusing State Parks.
2. About \$2.4 million for new water lines at campgrounds, day-use areas, headquarters, shops, and shower facilities at Hartman Creek, Merrick, Newport, Perrot, Potawatomi, Rocky Arbor and Willow River State Parks and Governor Earl Peshtigo River and Kettle Moraine State Forests.
3. About \$122,000 for new water fountains at boat launches, campgrounds, day-use areas, and trailheads at Belmont Mound, Brunet Island, Council Grounds, Governor Dodge, New Glarus Woods and Rib Mountain State Parks, Sugar River State Trail, Cadiz Springs State Recreation Area, the MacKenzie Center, and the Willow Flowage.
4. About \$1.2 million for new wells at boat launches and landings, campgrounds, day-use areas, headquarters, and horse lots at Amnicon Falls, Big Bay, Governor Thompson, Harrington Beach, Kinnickinnic, Kohler-Andrae, Lake Wissota, Mill Bluff, Potawatomi, Rib Mountain, Rocky Arbor, Tower Hill and Wildcat Mountain State Parks, Brule River, Governor Knowles, Governor Earl Peshtigo River, Kettle Moraine and Northern Highland-American Legion State Forests, Cadiz Springs State Recreation Area, and the MacKenzie Center.

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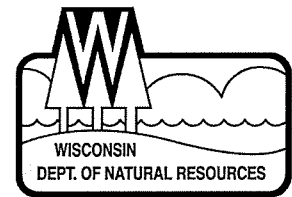
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Most visitors will never notice that the water infrastructure is up-to-date. But if those fixtures are run down or out-of-service, it may impact the visitor's experience in our State Parks and may impact their plans to come back or visit other State Parks in the future. Further, an isolated illness or outbreak of water-related disease at our State Parks would not only be devastating to those impacted and their loved ones, but could cause ripple effects and harm our entire outdoors-based tourism industry.

Despite significant progress made in previous sessions with addressing needed upgrades, a substantial backlog of water-related facility and infrastructure projects still remains. The upgrades in this bill have the potential to make positive improvements at 36 properties across 30 counties, benefiting the residents and tourists who contributed to 20 million State Park System visits in 2020 and will help to ensure that number continues to grow.

In short, 2021 Assembly Bill 693 provides the funding needed to complete the remaining high and medium priority backlogged water infrastructure projects in our State Parks System. By passing this bill, we can improve visitor experiences, promote parks-based tourism which has positive impacts throughout our communities, and protect the health and safety of millions of State Park System visitors for decades to come.

As one final note, I'd like to point out that the companion to Assembly Bill 693, Senate Bill 664, passed the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy on a 5 – 0 vote on January 18th and passed the full Senate on January 25th by voice vote.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2021 Assembly Bill 693

Amounts obligated under the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 Program for water infrastructure projects in the state park system

February 2, 2022

Good morning Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Steve Schmelzer, and I am the Bureau Director overseeing the Wisconsin State Park System for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 693 (AB 693), related to water infrastructure projects in state parks.

The Wisconsin State Park System has seen more than a 20% increase in visitation in the last two calendar years, serving more than 22 million people across more than 100 properties statewide. These visitors engage in a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities from camping and hiking, to biking and boating. The facilities at park system properties allow the department to meet the needs of visitors and ensure their health and safety. While many visitors will never notice that they have access to working water fountains, restrooms, and shower facilities, they will notice when those water infrastructure facilities are outdated or out of service.

AB 693 would provide up to \$5.6 million in authorized but unobligated Stewardship funds from previous years to enable the department to work through the backlog of water infrastructure projects that help to ensure the health and safety of all users. There are priority projects across all types of properties including state parks, forests, trails, and recreation areas that address critical water infrastructure needs. There are over 100 of these projects in waiting, and they include the replacement of entire water systems including wells, waterlines, and fixtures, and the addition of new wells and drinking fountains at high use areas such as trail heads and boat launches.

2017 Act 71 and 2019 Act 93 were passed to address similar needs across the State Park System, and as a result, a lot has been accomplished. These laws funded many different projects including:

- A wastewater infrastructure replacement at Peninsula State Park;
- A water infrastructure improvement project at Devil's Lake State Park;
- Vault toilet replacements at Governor Dodge, Peninsula, Blue Mound, and Wyalusing State Parks and Richard Bong State Recreation Area;
- Shower building and fixture upgrades that are currently under construction at Copper Falls, Governor Dodge, Hartman Creek, Rocky Arbor, and Yellowstone State Parks; and
- A vault toilet replacement project that has just completed the design process for buildings at Big Bay, Governor Dodge, and Mirror Lake State Parks and Northern Highland American Legion State Forest.

This bill would build on these prior years of investment and would enable the department to continue to provide access to the water infrastructure services that so many visitors benefit from.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 693
Public Hearing Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
February, 02, 2022
Michael McFadzen
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My name is Michael McFadzen from Plymouth WI. I'm representing Friends of the Kettle Moraine State Forest, I'm past Policy Chairperson for Friends of Wisconsin State Parks (FWSP) and a columnist for Midwest Silent Sports Magazine.

Wisconsin residents love their state parks. Anyone who visits Wisconsin State Parks and there are aprox 20 M annual visitors, knows that these are truly special places. But despite the enjoyment from outdoor recreational opportunities, dilapidated infrastructure has been a problem. There are thousands of backlogged projects which are estimated at approx. \$1B to remedy.

Using the funds allocated in this bill we will be able to finish all high and medium priority water projects. Including but not limited to having clean water for state park visitors and prevent septic waste from polluting ground and surface water in these pristine landscapes. Just think of what an outbreak of water related disease at a state park would do to Wisconsin's tourism industry.

Wisconsin is one of the only park systems in the country which funds its operations almost completely from user fees. This has led to the gradual deterioration of infrastructure and operations. Transitioning to this self-funding model ignores park planning and upkeep. It also can price out families and low-income wage earners who can't afford fees and who need the valuable physical and mental health benefits more than anyone. Outdoor

recreation is surging in this Covid era as it's widely known that outside spaces are safe places.

To provide park funding context here, annual WI park operation costs are reported to be in the \$18M range which reflect fees collected from visitors. Up until 1995 Parks received GPR Dollars like other states. Minnesota, with similar sized system, funds its park at \$52 million annually. This points to why this bill is so important, we are underfunding our state lands.

In order to save money, Wisconsin often uses a Band-Aid approach to fix infrastructure which is ultimately more costly in the long run.

Don't forget the economic side of this issue. Parks are a huge tourism driver. There are over 8,200 jobs, \$350 million in income, and \$1 billion in spending generated from state parks tourism.

FWSP, the statewide organization that represents state lands users wholly support this bill. There are Over 80 Wisconsin Parks Friends groups including Friends of the Kettle Moraine Forest of which I'm President, that have donated over \$10M and thousands of volunteer hours to our state parks, trails, forests and natural areas. These dedicated organizations have made it possible for state park visitors to enjoy their experiences in this underfunded era. If it wasn't for these Friends Groups, parks would be in a world of hurt.

Management of parks and natural resources must be viewed in a multi-generational continuum. There is a sacred trust to conserve these resources for future generations. This important bill will make needed improvements at 36 properties across 30 counties. Let's start getting our parks back to where they should be when Wisconsin was a national leader. This bill is an important step in that direction.



Friends of Wisconsin State Parks

*Preserving, Promoting, Protecting and Enhancing State
Parks, Forests, Trails, and Recreational Areas*

Legislative Hearing: Assembly Bill AB 693

February 2, 2022

Assembly Committee Members-

Thank you for allowing Friends of Wisconsin State Parks to provide written testimony in support of Assembly Bill AB 693. This bill proposes to provide \$5.6 million in authorized but unobligated Stewardship bonding authority from the most recent fiscal year to complete necessary health and safety water infrastructure upgrades in our State Park System.

Friends of Wisconsin State Parks is a statewide nonprofit organization with a mission to preserve, protect, promote and enhance the Wisconsin State parks, forests, trails and recreation areas. We also provide support to over 70 local nonprofit Friends groups who work to support their local state park system property. FWSP and the local groups work hard to enhance the state park system visitor's experience and this includes the need for visitors to have restrooms in good repair and that the water is safe and available. The water and sewer systems in many of our state parks are original, and in need of repair and updating. Some of this water infrastructure is over 60 years old and is failing.

Our Wisconsin State Parks have a reputation to be a clean, safe and a beautiful place to vacation and visit, with wonderful camping, programming and top-notch outdoor recreation. We need to make sure that the water infrastructure is in good repair and available around the state.

The Assembly Bill AB 693 before the committee today, would be a large step in allowing for many of the needed upgrades and repairs. Please refer to the list of the many state park system properties that would benefit from this funding and includes a list of properties where the funding is proposed to be used. Some progress has been made with the previous water infrastructure funding and this additional funding will go a long way to achieve results for the backlog of projects in our State Park System. It will also help to eliminate the costly emergency repairs on the aging water infrastructure around the state.

By passing this bill, we can be assured that the high and medium priority properties will get the necessary work completed and lead to an improved visitor experience by over 18 million annual visitors.

For the Parks and Trails-

Patricia Loosen

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January 09, 2022
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Wisconsin TU Supports AB 693

Wisconsin Trout Unlimited would like to thank the Sponsors and co-sponsors of AB 693 for showing this commitment to improving our State Parks. These places are a vital part of our tourism industry and greatly add to the quality of life that we as Wisconsinites enjoy. We believe facilities in our State Parks should enhance the pristine lands and waters they encompass, not threaten or degrade them. Investments like the ones being proposed today will help ensure that our Parks will be there to serve the public for generations to come.

Our members value the recreational opportunities that the woods and waters of Wisconsin offer. After a day of fishing, many of us will retreat to a campground in one of our State Parks. We've grown accustomed to finding clean campsites, with a place to picnic, share stories around the fire, a bathroom that works, and maybe even a hot shower. The quality of our parks adds greatly to the outdoor experiences we crave.

We'd like to bring your attention to the economic impacts that trout fishing in particular, and outdoor recreation in general, provide to our state. A 2016 study of anglers in the Driftless Area found that trout fishing generates 1.6 billion dollars of economic activity annually in that region alone! And recent studies by the Outdoor Industry Association shows that outdoor recreation in Wisconsin generates 17.9 billion dollars in direct consumer spending annually.

Wisconsin Trout Unlimited understands that we all live, work, and play downstream. We are encouraged to see the proposed upgrades in the facilities at our State Parks. We look forward to working with the Legislature and State Agencies to continue making the necessary investments in these public lands, and to ensure that future generations will have access to cold, clean, fishable water in Wisconsin.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to public service.

Mike Kuhr

Wisconsin Trout Unlimited, State Council Chair

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Trout Unlimited's 2016 report entitled "The Economic Impact of Trout Fishing in the Driftless Area" can be viewed here:
<http://www.dare restoration.com/documents/Economic%20Impact%20Summary%20of%20Trout%20Angling%20in%20the%20Driftless%20Area.pdf>

The Outdoor Industry Associations data for Wisconsin can be viewed here:
<https://outdoorindustry.org/state/wisconsin/>

The Wisconsin Council of Trout Unlimited ("WITU") is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization which consists of approximately 6,800 volunteer members in 21 chapters in Wisconsin working to ensure that future generations have access to cold, clean, fishable water. In a typical year, WITU and its Chapters report over 50,000 volunteer hours, working on conservation projects, youth education and outreach events, and operating Service Partnership Programs for the military veterans and first responders in our communities.