

Sierra Club and Waukesha Environmental Action League

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Finance Committee Cuts Recycling Fund, Trashes Wisconsin

Madison WI: Late Tuesday night, the powerful budget-writing Legislative Joint Committee on Finance adopted a budget amendment covering several recycling issues for the 2005-2007 State Biennial Budget. The motion by JFC Co-Chairman Senator Scott Fitzgerald, Republican of Juneau, reduces the recycling tipping fee and recycling surcharge and transfers \$2.9 million from the recycling fund to wildlife damage in fiscal year 2005-06, among other things.

“Tonight the powerful Finance Committee adopted a ‘Christmas Tree’ budget amendment for special interest groups,” said Caryl Terrell, Chapter Director for the statewide John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club. “Waste haulers got cheaper landfill costs, businesses got their recycling surcharge reduced and Wisconsin residents got dumped on.”

“The Waukesha County Environmental Action League (WEAL) is outraged that a plan to reduce tipping fees may soon be a reality,” said Charlene Lemoine, a WEAL spokesperson. The Waukesha County Environmental Action League (WEAL) is a volunteer grassroots organization established in 1978 to promote waste reduction, recycling and limiting dependence on landfills.

“Many of our members live in the shadows of two massive waste industry landfills: Emerald Park (Onyx) in Muskego and Orchard Ridge (Waste Management) in Menomonee Falls,” said Lemoine. “Our members see firsthand how profit generating companies have increased dumping as the mountains in their backyards continue to grow.”

“The Finance Committee trashed the Recycling Fund and sent a loud message to out of state waste haulers to Come Trash Wisconsin too,” said Terrell. “Wisconsin will face a solid waste crisis that our successful recycling efforts have managed to avoid for over a decade.”

Since Wisconsin's recycling law was implemented in 1990, Wisconsin residents have recycled over 40% of their trash, keeping that waste out of landfills, “saving” the equivalent of an average municipal waste landfill every 1.5 to 2 years and allowing us to avoid building new polluting landfills. Leaky landfills contaminate our air and drinking water supplies with pollutants like cyanide, mercury, dioxins, and lead.

“Opening Wisconsin to more out of state waste is what these industries have always wanted,” said Lemoine. “Several years ago, WEAL challenged Emerald Park’s proposal to haul waste from 6 counties in Illinois including metropolitan Chicago. Reducing tipping fees creates an incentive for importing waste and places the burden of future liabilities on Wisconsin residents.”

Arguing against the “super” amendment were Senators Russ Decker, Democrat of Schofield, and Lena Taylor, Democrat of Milwaukee. Senator Taylor, who requested that the amendment be broken in half, explained her support for recycling this way: “This is so important because the communities get stuck with the landfills.”

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Senator Decker said, “Recycling tipping fees are too low already when compared to surrounding states. They should be made higher, not reduced. The big waste companies, like Waste Management and Onyx, will haul more waste into Wisconsin, filling up our landfills and making money doing it. Already 36% of municipal solid waste comes from out of state.”

The amendment transfers money out of the Recycling Fund and dramatically reduces new revenues to the Fund. Over 1,000 local governments are eligible to receive recycling money to help pay for collecting waste and marketing recoverable materials.

“The ‘Christmas Tree’ amendment also included a present to the pulp and paper recycling industry,” said Terrell. “Recycled wastes sometimes include unusable materials. Instead of telling their suppliers to live up to the quality requirements in their contracts, this industry got a waiver from the recycling tipping fees. We supported the Governor’s 5% cap on the amount of solid waste disposal exempted from the fee. This provides a reasonable amount of flexibility for these companies, but retains the business incentive to reduce waste and insist on contract fulfillment of quality parameters.”

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