

Rep. Hebl: 2017-18 Session Brings Devastation to Wisconsin's Environment

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Earth Day 2018 is right around the corner, a yearly reminder of how vital environmental protection is to every single person on the planet. Conservation and environmental issues such as the threat of climate change are at the forefront of our minds, and Earth Day is an opportunity to look back at how the environment has been affected in the last two years.

This past biennium has continued a near-decade-long Republican practice of rolling back environmental protections. I have long been a fierce advocate for conservation issues, so it has been maddening to see Wisconsin's long tradition of environmental stewardship being decimated before our eyes. This last session, in particular, has seen some of the worst conservation decisions that Wisconsin has seen in generations.

For twenty years, Wisconsin had a law that stated if a mining company was unable to prove that their operations were pollution-free, they would not be allowed to mine in Wisconsin. Many have framed this as a "mining moratorium," but that is a misleading description. It was an anti-pollution law, and Republicans in the legislature repealed it this session. It appears that allowing companies to pollute in Wisconsin is more important to Republicans than clean air and drinking water.

Republicans also dramatically increased the amount of material that can be dredged in waterways. The previous law said that a property owner could remove 25 cubic yards of material over five years. The new law allows 50 cubic yards of

material to be removed every year. Poorly planned or poorly executed dredges can open the door for invasive species to flourish, can negatively affect neighboring riparian owners, and can release previously-suspended contaminants. Increasing the amount that can be removed tenfold is shortsighted and reckless.

Even when Republicans come up with a good environmental bill, it is often insufficient or contains poison pills. For example, this session we passed legislation that would make it easier to remediate contaminated wells. While it was a good bill- after all, people need clean water in their wells- it didn't actually address the underlying issue. We should be focusing on cleaning up and preventing the pollution that is causing the contaminated wells in the first place. The bill, while good, was a Band-Aid and not a cure.

In addition, there was a bill, Assembly Bill 956, which would require any wetland mitigation to occur near where the original wetland was being filled. This is a great idea, but the bill author then inserted an amendment that would have allowed a frac sand mining company to fill 16 acres of wetlands. Because of that anti-environment corporate handout, Democrats could not support the full bill. Assembly Republicans were so desperate to pass the measure that, even after the Senate did not pass AB956, they inserted similar language at the last second into an unrelated jobs bill to try to get it through. That bill also stalled in the Senate, which is both fortunate for environmentalists but unfortunate for the job seekers the bill would have benefitted, who are now left in the cold because of the nefarious antics by Assembly Republican leadership.

Earth Day is a time each year to think about how important the world's natural resources are to our everyday lives and to think about how we can preserve the planet for generations to come. It is clear that current leadership in Wisconsin does not hold the planet in as high of regard as they should, and unfortunately Wisconsin's beautiful natural resources suffer because of it. It is past time to recognize the environment's importance and legislate accordingly.