

Tom Tiffany: Wetlands reform legislation strikes balance

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As Wisconsinites, I believe we are fortunate to live in such a beautiful and scenic place – especially here in the northern part of the state. Our abundance of freshwater and forestland are vitally important to our state and local economy. As someone who operated an excursion boat on the Willow Flowage, I can attest to that. Tourists flock from all over to enjoy what you and I get to see every day.

In addition to Wisconsin being home to over 15,000 lakes, 84,000 miles of river, and 1,000 miles of shoreline, we also have about 5 million acres of wetlands. Recently, both houses of the Wisconsin Legislature passed legislation dealing with the permitting and mitigation requirements for nonfederal and artificial wetlands that has attracted a great deal of concern and unfortunately misinformation.

Wetlands are important to the environment. They function as nature's sponge, serving as purifiers for lakes, rivers and groundwater. Wetlands also provide habitat for fish and wildlife and serve as recreational areas for outdoors enthusiasts.

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In Wisconsin, our wetlands fall into one of two categories, federal and non-federal wetlands. Of the estimated 5 million acres of wetlands our state has, 4 million of them are federally protected by the Clean Water Act. These federally protected wetlands are either connected to or located near navigable waters. The legislation passed by the Wisconsin Legislature does not have any impact on federal wetlands.

What this legislation sought to address were issues surrounding the regulation of certain non-navigable, isolated and artificial non-federal wetlands. Wisconsin is one

of a few states that regulates non-federal wetlands.

For many landowners, small businesses, farmers and even local governments, the patchwork of regulations surrounding artificial wetlands and certain isolated wetlands has become costly and cumbersome.

At the bill's public hearing that was held back in December, a delegation of representatives from the modestly sized city of Cumberland, WI came to testify on how the current wetlands regulations were hampering their own local economic development efforts. Right here in the 12th Senate District, a potential small business was denied a construction permit in Rhinelander because the business's proposed driveway would cross a tiny artificial wetland. The local officials were absolutely befuddled by this decision and it cost the city a taxpaying small business.

The wetlands reform bill that the Legislature passed includes a number of commonsense and long overdue changes to existing law that will help smaller communities. In fact, sportsman groups like Ducks Unlimited and WI Trout Unlimited changed their position on this legislation after working with the bill's authors to address their concerns.

In the end, we still maintain our high environmental standards while striking a balance to allow for needed economic development - especially in our rural communities.

— *Tiffany, R-Hazelhurst, represents the 12th Senate District.*