

# Gregg Walker & Richard Moore: Cole moves quickly to radicalize DNR

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In late December, we warned that the selection of Preston Cole to run the state Department of Natural Resources was dangerous, not least because we believed Cole would attempt to remake the agency into one much like the DNR under former Gov. Jim Doyle — an agency whose bureaucrats and field staff pretty much terrorized citizens statewide.

“They destroyed property, they ruined lives, they degraded the environment in the name of aesthetics, they wallowed in the mud of hypocrisy,” we warned.

State Sen. Tom Tiffany (R-Hazelhurst) was wary, too, despite Cole’s selection being lauded by Republicans like former Gov. Scott Walker and the former DNR secretary under Walker, Cathy Stepp.

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Tiffany also advised that an early indicator of where Cole was likely to take the agency would be found in the appointment of his top lieutenants.

“He can choose people who will work with the people of Wisconsin or he can choose people who take us back to a DNR from the dark Doyle era of a decade ago,” he said. “It is he and Gov.-elect Evers’s choice.”

Well, apparently they have made that choice, and it’s not the one we hoped for, though it is the one we expected. Last week Cole showed his hand by selecting as an assistant deputy secretary none other than Todd Ambs, the agency’s former

water division administrator under Doyle.

As we report in today's edition, in his previous DNR position, Ambs supported and helped write rules that he and his colleagues hoped would subvert state law passed by elected officials, and he supported and pushed the most extremely radical shoreland zoning provisions, even trying to get strict impervious surface standards applied to many homes not even on the water.

So, to use Tiffany's words, Cole has decided to avoid choosing people who will work with the people of Wisconsin and has instead opted for people who would take us back to a DNR from the dark Doyle era of a decade ago.

Let's take a closer look at Ambs, the epitome of that choice.

First, Ambs must believe he is one of that privileged class that knows better than we do what is good public policy, and so why let the decisions of elected officials get in the way of the wisdom of bureaucrats.

And why let ethics get in the way of that wisdom, either? When Ambs was trying to get emergency rules implemented that would overturn the Job Creation Act passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor, he reported to the NRB that lawmakers expressed no concerns about the rules that would upend their work.

That's a curious response from lawmakers, to be sure, and it turned out not to be true. There was plenty of concern, only Ambs — who was tasked by the NRB with finding those concerns — couldn't find any.

As such, his honesty is as questionable as his politics.

In another instance, Ambs enthusiastically supported restoring the DNR's Bureau of Science Services. There would be nothing wrong with this, if it was truly a science bureau and not a propaganda bureau he wants. The DNR's science, on everything from climate change to impervious surfaces to seawalls, has been discredited time and again.

It has been tossed out of court; it has been ridiculed for its allegiance to averages rather than to specific scientific measurements; it has been ridiculed for relying on hypothetical assumptions rather than verifiable field tests to determine many of its conclusions.

The science bureau engaged in bogus science, in other words, and bogus science is exactly what Ambs will likely try to bring back to the agency.

Ambs also favors an ever expanding regulatory zone around water bodies, so much so that if he could have imposed a 1,000-foot regulatory boundary around lakes, which is what he wanted the DNR to do, all development and growth in the Northwoods would have been crippled for generations.

There are two critical points about a 1,000-regulatory zone around lakes for impervious surfaces. First, claiming that such a regulation is necessary to protect water quality flies in the face of the real science, which shows that the impervious surface numbers in the Northwoods pose no environmental threat to watershed water quality, either now or in the next few hundred years.

Draconian regulations that will cripple local economies and deprive people of their property rights simply aren't needed.

Second, it exposes Ambs' true mentality, that is, ever more regulation of private property is needed until it is regulated out of existence.

In his previous DNR stint, Ambs' goal was to expand regulatory zones and property restrictions ever more, until all private property becomes nonconforming. After all, the more regulations you have, the more nonconformity you have.

In the end, in such a world view, all property becomes nonconforming and subject to government control. In effect, there is no private property.

In one policy area, Ambs and The Times agree, though for different reasons.

When it comes to exempting incorporated cities and villages from shoreland zoning standards, those exemptions should end. There is simply no logic or fairness in imposing onerous regulations on communities based simply on a legal instrument and not on geography or natural resource standards, and especially so when urban exemption areas are the most polluted. That would actually call for stricter standards in those areas to improve water quality, not the ability to evade most standards.

It's important to observe, though, that Ambs isn't likely worried about equal protection or logic; he simply wants everything everywhere regulated in the most restrictive way possible, whether logic requires it or not, whether science calls for it

or not.

Finally, Cole's appointment of Ambs should serve as a wake up call for what is coming — an emboldened DNR that is regaining its authoritarian swagger. Surely, Cole knew of Ambs' previous role as a key player in the transformation of the DNR's reputation as a consumer-friendly organization to that of a feared police agency whose goal was to run roughshod over the average citizen.

That Cole would make a critical appointment that was bound to rile a wide swath of the population is to thumb his nose at them.

The truth is, with his appointment, Cole is telling us he is turning the agency loose again. He is telling us he is going to radicalize the DNR again, and will do so quickly. As Ambs tweeted after being appointed: "Time to get to work!"

That should scare us all.

*-Gregg Walker is publisher of The Lakeland Times. Richard Moore is senior investigative reporter for The Lakeland Times and the author of The New Bossism of the American Left.*