

Sen. Smith: Insider tactic endangers historic public land purchase

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MADISON – Senator Jeff Smith (D–Brunswick) condemned obstructive maneuvers by Republican members of the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) to block the largest land conservation effort in state history by employing underhanded procedural gambits to avoid even discussing the issue.

The funding, \$4 million from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, would be allocated to the Department of Natural Resources to purchase working forest conservation easements that protect northern Wisconsin's Pelican River Forest for future sustainable recreational and commercial uses. This funding would supplement \$11,384,000 already secured for the project. The land would then be re-sold in small parcels to private owners who agree to maintain public access and use sustainable forest management practices.

Expenditures from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program are subject to a 14-day passive review process during which any member can raise an objection anonymously. Under state statute, JFC must then meet to discuss the proposal and approve the expenditure, but there is no timeline for when the hearing must be held. Late last year, a member made an anonymous objection, but the committee has not yet scheduled a hearing. While Senator Mary Felzkowski (R–Irma) came forward as the source of the objection, funding remains blocked until JFC meets on the issue.

Western Wisconsin has also seen anonymous objectors jeopardize land purchases in the past. The 1,000 acre Tyrone Purchase on the Lower Chippewa River started in 2016 and the option to buy needed to be extended three times to finally get it done in 2018. During the process the Joint Finance Committee Chair, Alberta Darling (R–River Hills) said they “would not schedule a hearing on the land sale ‘at this

time' because 'an objection has been raised to the request.'"

"I wish I could say the Pelican River Forest purchase was an isolated incident, but we've seen this shadowy tactic used before," said Senator Smith. "It's unacceptable for a rogue committee member to anonymously halt funding for once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to expand public land access. Historic acquisitions like the Pelican River Forest shouldn't be held up by one person. I give Senator Felzkowski credit for coming forward as the objector, but sadly, this anonymous objection end-around tactic has been used far too often to torpedo incredibly important opportunities for the public."

"This project will be a boon to hunters, anglers, conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts," continued Smith. "Future commercial development of these properties should be done responsibly and sustainably. I call on the Joint Finance Committee to schedule and hold a hearing to approve this funding now so future generations of Wisconsinites can continue to hunt, fish and hike our forests."