

Sen. Wirch: Angered by GOP obstruction of major conservation project

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Kenosha – Sen. Bob Wirch (D-Somers) is disgruntled and disappointed today after the Republican majority on the Legislature’s Joint Finance Committee voted to deny Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funding for the Pelican River Forest project in northern Wisconsin. The project has been called the largest land conservation effort in state history.

“I’m outraged but definitely not surprised that Republicans have denied state stewardship funding for this historic conservation opportunity. They tried to stall the project indefinitely, hiding behind a loophole in committee rules. When called on it, they voted it down instead. It continues a recent pattern of Republican opposition to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, which is literally named in recognition of bipartisan support for conservation. With Earth Day coming up, this is especially shameful,” Wirch said.

In 2021, the Conservation Fund purchased a 70,000 acre reserve in northern Wisconsin known as the Pelican River Forest in order to safeguard what the group says is “the largest remaining unprotected block of privately owned forested land in the state.” The organization planned to secure conservation easements and then re-sell the land in small blocks to owners who agree to allow public access. This would also ensure that the land remains on the property tax rolls. Last fall, the state Natural Resources Board approved a \$15.5 million conservation easement to preserve more than 56,000 acres of the forest. The DNR had signed off on use of around \$4 million in Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program funds to cover a portion of the cost of the easement. Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee abused a committee rule to anonymously object to the funding request until public pressure

forced them to hold a public hearing and vote. The committee today voted along party lines to kill the funding.

The Pelican River Forest aids the climate by storing the equivalent of carbon emissions released by 4 million cars each year. Protecting the block of forestland would also preserve vital habitats for endangered and threatened species. The project has the support of conservation, wildlife and hunting and outdoor recreation groups.