

Sen. Wirch: GOP obstruction threatens prime opportunity for state land investment

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Madison – Wisconsin State Senator Bob Wirch (D-Somers) is denouncing Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) for obstructing what would be the largest land conservation effort in state history, putting the project in jeopardy, and abusing committee rules to do so without public scrutiny.

“Time after time, these Republicans have used their power to undermine land acquisitions and investments that are in the public good. This time, they are taking the side of big developers over conservationists, hunters, anglers, outdoor enthusiasts and even the timber industry. People who use this land for hunting, fishing or other forms of recreation are also spending money in these communities, helping their budgets,” 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. This needed first to go through JFC’s “14 day passive review” process, whereby during those 14 days, any member of the committee can submit an anonymous objection to the plan for any reason or no reason at all. The funding is then held up indefinitely until JFC holds a hearing on the plan. However,

state statute provides no timeline for when the hearing must be held; Republicans on the committee have been using that loophole to delay Stewardship projects indefinitely.

“Republicans in the State Legislature seem to know no limit when it comes to abuse of power and twisting the rules to get what they want. This project is a once in a lifetime opportunity. These lands don’t often come up for sale, and when they do, they only last on the market a short time. It’s clear that this investment would be good for those who enjoy the outdoors, but it’ll also pump money into the state economy through tourism, and it’s in keeping with our state’s great tradition on protecting our natural resources, something Republicans like former Governor Warren Knowles used to support,” added Wirch.

Senator Mary Felzkowski (R-Irma) has come forward to say she objected to the project but that other Republican committee members had problems with it, as well. 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 outdoor recreation groups.