

George Meyer remains in center of debates on conservation in Wisconsin



Former DNR Secretary George Meyer, who served Republican Tommy Thompson, has become a thorn in the side of GOP lawmakers as he battles on various environmental fronts. Credit: Joe Koshollek/For the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

By *Bill Glauber* of the Journal Sentinel

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The big subject is the state of conservation in Wisconsin.

The speaker is George Meyer, executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation.

The comments he offers are voiced in a calm, measured way, while he sits at a picnic table on a sunny day in Madison and, later, in a brief telephone followup.

On the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the agency he once headed: "When it comes to policy, they're absent without leave."

On the [United Sportsmen of Wisconsin](#), the group that lost a \$500,000 grant after disclosures about its tax status and a hunting violation by its president: "This is a front group for political operatives in this state, and I think sportsmen are starting to catch on."

On politics: "When I started, the Republican Party was the conservation party and the Democrats were less so. But that has totally shifted."

More than a decade removed from his long tenure at the DNR, Meyer remains a force in conservation policy in Wisconsin. The [organization](#) he leads is an umbrella group for 185 hunting, fishing, trapping and forestry related groups. The WWF also has 6,000 individual members, Meyer says.

When Meyer speaks, people take notice, whether the issue is mining or rules for hunting and fishing.

No one on the scene now has his résumé, which includes a DNR career that lasted more than 30 years. An attorney, Meyer led the DNR's enforcement division for 10 years and was secretary from 1993 to 2001.

After a change in law that allowed the governor, instead of a citizen board, to appoint the secretary, Meyer was the first DNR leader to be hired by a governor (Tommy Thompson).

He was also the first to be fired by a governor (Scott McCallum).

Meyer has his supporters and his critics.

State Sen. Tom Tiffany (R-Hazelhurst), who has tussled with Meyer over mining legislation, says Meyer is easy to talk to, even though they have philosophical disagreements. But he questions whether Meyer is listening to WWF member organizations on policy.

"I think he drives the train for the WWF," Tiffany says.

Tiffany adds that Meyer's criticism of the DNR hurt morale at the agency.

"I oftentimes ask myself the question, I wonder what some of the employees who were with him in the agency years ago, how they view his comments. Because he's not just critical of the political leadership, he has been critical of the entire department," Tiffany says.

Jeff Nania, a former executive director of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, says Meyer's greatest strength is his ability to teach people about conservation and get them involved on issues.

"If you don't step up, things are going to be controlled by people who may not have your same interests," Nania says. "He has quite the way of educating people and stirring passions in them."

At 66, Meyer remains active in outdoor pursuits and conservation issues. He loves fishing and hunting but spends most of his time cultivating the WWF. He says he earns \$40,000 annually running the organization. He also draws a state pension.

"My strengths are policy, analysis and advocacy," he says.

He and his wife, Jayne, have been married 40 years and live in Madison. They have two grown children: Andrew, a nurse; and Jocelyn, a teacher.

Meyer has a welcoming face and a rasp in his voice. He walks with a limp, the result of a long-ago truck accident that left him with one leg shorter than the other.

'Crunchy Conservative'?

Describe him as a "crunchy conservative" and Meyer shoots back, "I don't think anybody truly knows my politics."

"I think I'm pretty moderate, pretty fiscally conservative," he says.

When he left the DNR, he says both Democrats and Republicans tried to get him to run for office. He declined. According to the [Wisconsin Democracy Campaign website](#), Meyer has contributed \$2,350 to Democratic candidates since 2008.

Meyer says of WWF: "We aren't involved in electoral politics and we never will be."

He adds that "most sportsmen of this state do not believe conservation should be a political wedge issue. They believe like it was 20 years ago. Conservation should be a bipartisan issue. "

Raised on a 100-acre dairy farm outside New Holstein, Meyer recalls a sturdy childhood of long walks down a country lane, cleaning the barn, listening to songbirds in the fields.

"I grew up with deep feelings for our farm and our land," he says.

When he was 19, while working a summer job, he was injured in an accident while sitting in the back end of a truck packed with wood boards. The truck tipped and the material clipped Meyer.

"Lucky I only shattered my leg," he says.

Meyer was hospitalized for six months.

At St. Norbert College, he studied economics and business administration. He attended law school at the University of Wisconsin, thrust into the turbulence of the Madison campus at the height of demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

"That was quite an introduction into a different world," he says, raising up a memory of smelling tear gas as it wafted into a law school classroom.

Two weeks before the first Earth Day in 1970, Meyer began working at the DNR as an intern. He was hired full time in 1972.

"First day you come on the job as a regulator maybe you're not real smart," he says.

But he learned quickly, taking advice from mentors, using his skills as a lawyer and his background in economics to take on tough issues.

Center Of Controversy

In the mid-1980s, he was thrust into the center of a years-long storm over spearfishing. After a key court decision, the state's bands of Lake Superior Chippewa exercised their right to spearfish off their reservations during spawning season.

Tensions flared between the tribes and some North Woods residents and sportsmen. As the head of the DNR Enforcement Division, it was Meyer who was on the front line, not only negotiating regulations with the tribes but also helping to keep the peace amid violent protests at boat landings.

"This was the crucible where I ended up achieving the skills I could use later on," he says. "It was extremely pressure-laden."

His eight years leading the DNR were crammed with struggles over mining, mercury emissions, recycling and the size of the state's deer herd.

There were intense bureaucratic fights, too. Thompson got the Legislature to give the governor the power to hire agency secretaries for the natural resources and agriculture agencies. Meyer also reorganized the DNR.

When Thompson left the governorship and McCallum took over, Meyer was out.

Meyer recalls that McCallum took him aside and told him: "George, you know this hurts me more than it does you."

Meyer stepped away from state government. For two years, he recharged and became a visiting professor at Lawrence University in Appleton.

In 2003, he became the first executive director of the WWF. Under Meyer, the number of organizations under the group's umbrella has more than doubled.

"The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation was there the whole time," he says. "I'm their voice. There isn't a single policy we take that goes before the Legislature that isn't voted upon by our 55-member board of directors."

MacKenzie Bid Rejected

Since 2006, the WWF has run the MacKenzie Environmental Center in Poynette, operating the center under a 10-year contract with the DNR. Student visits to the 250-acre property nearly doubled in the last six years.

But in February, the DNR asked for new bids as it sought to retool the center. This month, the [DNR rejected the WWF bid](#), the only one it received, and said it would run the facility itself.

There were likely many reasons for the switch, including the DNR's intention to "develop a new outdoor skills curriculum" at the center. Meyer says there may have been some political payback too, since his group has sometimes pushed back against DNR proposals.

"These things really get interconnected politically," he says.

The politics of conservation — and development — have certainly been front and center in Madison in recent years as the Republican-led Legislature pushed through a mining bill.

The emergence of a group called United Sportsmen of Wisconsin Inc., [which had ties to Republican insiders](#), appeared for a time to muddy the message of sportsmen on key conservation issues, sometimes backing legislation that the WWF voiced concerns on.

"I suspect United Sportsmen is probably history in this state," Meyer says.

But Meyer subscribes to a pendulum view of politics, where a swing one way is often followed by a swing the opposite way.

He remains confident that the WWF will retain a significant voice in policy. He briefly considered retiring next summer, but he signed up to lead the group until at least the middle of 2015.

He'd rather be out hunting and fishing. Instead, he'll work hard on issues.

"My values haven't changed," he says.



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