

Green Bay Press Gazette.

~~'We're regressing again' on water quality in Wisconsin~~

Patrick Durkin For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Published 6:57 p.m. CT Aug. 2, 2018 | Updated 7:07 p.m. CT Aug. 2, 2018

Nature inspires Wisconsin's core values with abundant water, vast forests and woodlands, and diverse fish and wildlife that boomed much of the past 50 years as our citizenry embraced a creative, hardworking conservation ethic that benefited all.

At least that's how former Department of Natural Resources secretary George Meyer views how this great state became even greater after the 1960s before faltering this decade.

"Wisconsin has a very strong conservation core that starts from a solid, resilient land and water base," Meyer said July 21 in Eagle River when addressing the Wisconsin Outdoor Communicators Association conference at the Trees for Tomorrow education center. "This state enjoys strong support for its natural resources, whether it's based in recreation or clean water. This is our water, and our concerns are evident in a strong public-trust doctrine and a history of public input that began in 1927 with a citizen-based natural resources board."

But Meyer, a self-described optimist and recent inductee into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, shook his head in dismay at recent attacks on the state's water, wetlands and waterways.

"We're regressing again, and that's something I never thought I'd see in my career," said Meyer, 70, an attorney who worked for the DNR from 1972 to 2002. He has since served as executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation. The WWF consists of 200 conservation clubs and organizations.

"Our Legislature now answers to only one thing, and that's economic interests," Meyer said. "It's not even close. When a business association, or the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the Dairy Business Association, or lobbyists for the Koch brothers and Americans for Prosperity show up in the Capitol, they throw tremendous weight. Most of our legislators listen to those economic interests. They buy it."

RELATED: Summer sweat turns into winter heat at Heberlein's shack

Green Bay Press Gazette.

Meyer said many lawmakers lack historical perspective on Wisconsin's natural resources. He grew up on a dairy farm near New Holstein and graduated from St. Norbert College in De Pere, which gave him firsthand insights into water-quality issues during the 1950s and '60s.

"When I went to the landfill with my dad in our pickup truck, we dumped everything over the edge, and that landfill certainly wasn't clay-lined," Meyer said. "Back then it was usually a wetland or gravel pit.

"And when I went to college along the banks of the Fox River, the worst thing that could happen to you when horsing around was to get thrown into the river," he continued. "There was a good chance you'd come out with a rash or earache. The only fish in that river were carp, and they had to surface to breathe. There weren't walleyes in that stretch, which was downstream of all the paper mills. And yes, we had walleyes over on the Wisconsin River, but if you cooked them, all you smelled was sulfur. You couldn't eat them."

Meyer said the Fox and Wisconsin rivers rebounded, thanks to responsible government regulations and a cooperative private sector that attacked pollution with low-cost innovations.

"Because of that, there's a world-class walleye fishery in the Fox River and in the bay (of Green Bay)," Meyer said. "When I first worked as a DNR law clerk in 1970, there was no Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act or industry standards for solid waste or toxic waste," Meyer said. "ORAP (Wisconsin's Outdoor Recreation Act Program) was winding down and the Stewardship Program was years away. It was a different world. Many municipalities only did primary (basic sewer) treatments before discharging wastewaters, and those discharges were downstream of drinking-water intakes for good reason."

Meyer said Wisconsin's water problems today are far less severe than in 1970, but they're again worsening because of complacency and disregard for the public good.

"We still have problems with urban runoff, but the bigger problem is from agricultural runoff," he said. "Laws passed the past four to six years are structured to make things worse. They will not make things better for our groundwater. Over 43 percent of private wells in Juneau and southern Wood counties are now over the limit for nitrates (fertilizer), and over 50 percent of wells in some townships in Kewaunee County are contaminated by nitrates, E.coli or fecal chloroforms."

Green Bay Press Gazette.

They've lowered the level of at least 22 lakes in that area, as well as many streams, and some are virtually gone," Meyer said. "Many people invested their life savings into lakefront properties that are now marshes. I get a kick out of all this talk about protecting property rights for shoreline development. What about the property rights of people who lost their shorelines? When one group's property rights affect other people's property, we need legal balance to protect those interests."

Meyer said Wisconsin's tourism, manufacturing and agricultural industries would all benefit if citizens demanded bipartisan cooperation from lawmakers. Unfortunately, when he looks around, Meyer sees too many middle-aged people and folks his age who ignore the state's historical roots in natural resources.

"Everyone is busy leading their individual lives, but we have to galvanize that support or we won't leave much for our grandkids," Meyer said. "I see a very strong conservation core in our millennials. We need to tap into these young people's energy to turn things around."

And although Meyer faults current lawmakers for helping private interests dominate natural-resource policies, he also faults former Gov. Jim Doyle for letting issues slide that way.

"Doyle ran for governor saying he would restore independence to the DNR secretary, but when that bill came to his desk, he vetoed it," Meyer said. "Gov. Doyle lied. He said one thing publicly and something else privately. Now, Gov. Walker, with a Republican Legislature would have likely changed it, too, but the political stain would have been on them. That stain is now on Doyle. Let's pin the tail on the right donkey."

Patrick Durkin is a freelance writer who covers outdoors for USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin. Email him at patrickdurkin56@gmail.com.