Senator, environmentalist Gaylord Nelson dies

BY RYAN NAKASHIMA
The Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Gaylord Nelson, the feisty Democratic senator and governor from Wisconsin who helped start the modern environmental movement with the creation of Earth Day 45 years ago, died Sunday. He was 90.

Nelson died of cardiovascular failure at his home in the Washington suburb of Kensington, Md., said Bill Christofferson, his biographer and family spokesman.

A conservationist years before it was fashionable, Nelson was recognized as one of the world’s foremost environmental leaders. The former governor and senator started Earth Day in 1970, when an estimated 20 million people participated. April 22 is still celebrated today by planting trees, cleaning up trash and lobbying for a clean environment.

Nelson’s environmental efforts left a lasting legacy at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. UWSP’s College of Natural Resources — and more specifically, its Global Environmental Management Education Center — were formed with the ideals of the late Wisconsin senator in mind.

Based on the conservation heritage of Nelson and other environmental leaders, the CNR in 1986 was the first institution in the nation to establish a conservation education major. Fellowships bearing Nelson’s name still are given annually within the CNR.

In the Senate, Nelson had a reputation for cocktail party stunts, like ripping up a Milwaukee phone book (there was a trick to it) or doing one-arm push-ups.

“He was just an incredible person: humble, funny, proud of his roots in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, and never changed by the power and pomp of the offices that he held,” Gov. Jim Doyle said in a statement Sunday.

Fifteen years after he left office, Nelson received a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995 for his environmental efforts from then-President Clinton.

“As the father of Earth Day, he is the grandfather of all that grew out of that event: the Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act,” read the proclamation from Clinton.

In 1968, Nelson became only the second Democrat during the 20th century to be elected governor of Wisconsin.

He used a penny-a-pack tax on cigarettes to allow the state to buy hundreds of thousands of acres of park land, wetlands and

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NELSON: Earth Day

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT GAYLORD NELSON

"When I became governor, Gaylord Nelson gave me some very important advice to stay focused on the things that really matter to people. He lived those words, and his picture, sitting over my desk as governor, is a daily reminder to focus on things that will be of great significance over time."

-Gov. Jim Doyle

Gaylord Nelson was an outstanding man and a devoted public servant. He leaves a tremendous legacy of protecting the environment, but his work touched many, other lives, too. He was widely respected, even revered, during the span of his career.

-U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis.

"He was quite simply one of my heroes. He was an environmental champion, a role model and a friend. His many contributions to the preservation of our environment will be remembered every April as we celebrate Senator Nelson's legacy Earth Day."

-U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis.

"Anyone who cares about the quality of our air, water and land should be grateful for the life of Gaylord Nelson. Gaylord Nelson and Earth Day proved the power of an idea. This simple but compelling idea truly made the world a better place."

-William P. Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society

"He's a great human being, never really driven by ego as so many politicians are, public figures. He had a very human touch and he liked people, of course, which I think in no small measure accounted for his success in terms of his political career."

-Bud Jordahl, who worked with Nelson in various conservation jobs with the state, the federal government and the University of Wisconsin-Madison

The establishment of the Apostle Islands National Seashore "would have never happened without him. It took 10 years to do it. We went through a lot of humps to do it, but he persisted and stuck with it... He was one of a kind."

-Martin Hanson of Maiben, a lifelong friend of Nelson's who worked with him to help establish the Apostle Islands National Seashore