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FEATURED

Meyer warns against sales of public lands

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Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Executive Director George Meyer was in Ashland Wednesday, warning against proposals to sell off federal lands including national forests, national monuments and national wildlife refuges, which Meyer said jeopardized the ability of millions to visit lands currently held in trust for generations of Americans yet to come.

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation/Submitted Photo

The head of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation warned Wednesday that there is an increasingly strong movement in the United States to sell off federal lands such as National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, Bureau of Land Management lands and National Monuments.

According to WWF Executive Director George Meyer, while there has long been pressure from oil, gas and mining interests to wrest away control of federal lands, especially in the West, in the last few years, this effort has gained substantial support, becoming an issue in the presidential election campaign.

Meyer said the campaign has the support of the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee and has even resulted in a current proposal to sell off the fourth most popular national wildlife refuge, Vieques, an unspoiled gem of sea and shoreland created from a former U.S. Navy Base and established in 2002. Located in Puerto Rico, a number of Congressional Republicans have advocated selling off the refuge for commercial development and using the proceeds to help pay off Puerto Rico's \$70 billion in debt.

Meyer also said, in a related matter, that House Committee on Natural Resources chairman Rob Bishop, a Utah Republican, has refused to allow a vote on renewal of the popular Land and Water Conservation Fund. The fund uses royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling to protect public lands and to promote outdoor recreation.

Meyer said the two issues should be of deep concern to Wisconsin residents who have drawn great benefits from both public lands and the Land and Water Conservation fund.

Meyer noted that the WWF was made up of 195 groups of sportsmen and women in the state, and is a part of the National Wildlife Federation.

"We are supporting them on this issue, but our citizens have a major interest on this issue," he said.

Meyer recalled the "Sagebrush Rebellion" of the 1970s as one chapter of the effort to obtain control of federal lands, and said the presidential election has given the push to remove the lands from federal control and into private hands.

"Ted Cruz has put out an ad in Nevada very specifically saying he would sell off the federal lands," Meyer. "His aides qualified that saying he would sell off all lands except for national parks and military reservations, but that leaves the refuges, monuments, forests to be sold off."

He noted that when votes to sell off public lands have taken place in Congress, both Republican U.S. Senator Ron Johnson and fellow Republican Seventh District Congressman Sean Duffy have voted in favor of the proposals.

"We are facing a very serious situation," he said. "We are trying to get the word out to sportsmen and others, because this is bigger than sportsmen."



Meyer said the federal lands are an important legacy for all of the citizens of the United States.

"The sale of federal lands in the West or in Puerto Rico would be a terrible precedent for the future potential sale of federal lands in Wisconsin," Meyer said. "Hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin citizens and visiting tourists use federal lands in Wisconsin every year. Federal lands are a major component of Wisconsin's economically important tourist industry."

Closely related to this issue, Meyers said, was Congressman Bishop's intransigence in refusing to allow the Land and Water Conservation Reauthorization Bill to come to a vote.

He noted that through another mechanism, the act has been reauthorized for three years.

"The senate has permanently reauthorized it, and now it's got to go to the House of Representatives," Meyer said. "That is where Congressman Duffy could really help out to get permanent reauthorization."

Meyer noted that Duffy has not come forward with a position on the bill, and he urged Wisconsin residents to contact Duffy's office, asking for his support.

"Senators (Ron) Johnson and (Tammy) Baldwin ultimately voted for it, and Congressman Duffy needs some encouragement," he said.

Meyer emphasized that the Conservation Fund was not paid for by taxpayer dollars but by oil and gas royalty revenues.

"The principle of this is that U.S. citizens are selling off federal resources and the royalties from these sales are being plowed back into natural resources accessible to the public," he said.

The payback to Wisconsin has been huge, Meyer said.

"Over the last five decades, Wisconsin has received \$212 million that has been used for hundreds of state and local parks; and projects such as the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, the Ice Age and North Country National Scenic Trails, the St. Croix National Scenic River and the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.



Funds from the Conservation Fund have also been used to support the Wisconsin Forest Legacy program that buys land from Wisconsin industrial forests seeking to sell their properties, as well as obtaining conservation and public access easements on more lands when they are transferred to other private companies.

"Wisconsin has received \$21,500,000 for this purpose," Meyer said. "It results in continued public land for recreational use, continued sustainable forestry practices and keeping these lands as working forests."

Meyer called Wisconsin's public lands vital to the state's economy

"The U.S. Census Bureau reports that annually 2.9 million people participate in hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching and other recreational pursuits in the states, contributing \$3.9 million to the state economy," he said.

Meyer said that resolutions in support of retaining federal lands has passed at the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation's annual meeting on April 8-9, while a resolution opposing the sale of federal public lands was easily adopted at the Dane County Conservation Congress's April 11 annual meeting.

"It will pass the state meeting in a couple of weeks overwhelmingly," Meyer predicted.

Larry Servinsky

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