



Herbert F. Behnke  
1925-2013

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—Herb Behnke

Herb Behnke makes no bones about whose interests he had in mind as the longest-serving member of the board that oversees Wisconsin's natural resources.

"I never really listened much to special interest groups. To me, it was the common men and women who loved to hunt and fish, and what they wanted," said the Lena native and longtime Shawano resident in a 2008 Conservation Hall of Fame interview.

Numerous people who contributed comments to this biography agree with that. Madison writer and former DNR information and education employee Tim Eisele called Behnke "the sportsman's friend." Former Natural Resources Board Chair Jerry O'Brien said: "He is known for his common-sense standpoint, doing what is best for our interests."

Common sense is what a farm boy from northern Wisconsin learns from experiences close to the land. Born in 1925, the youngest of 10 children, he was obliged to stay home and work on the farm during World War II. His formal education yielded a diploma from Lena High School, and while he took some university-level management courses, Behnke fits the mold of self-made man who was called on time and again to serve the citizens' interests.

As a young man, he left the farm to go to work at Cooperative Services International, a Shawano-based animal breeding business, where he spent his career and rose to the position of vice president of marketing. Along the way, he also became involved in many citizen groups and professional organizations. He helped form the Northeast Conservation Council, which represented the interests of several counties in northeastern Wisconsin, and served as a member of Wisconsin Conservation Congress and its executive board.

But he never forgot lessons learned from the farm. His opposition to deer baiting as a Natural Resources Board member and chair in the 1990s was impacted by those farm years. "There was a lot of tuberculosis on farms. I remember all the cattle being hauled away from our farm...I gained an appreciation of how so many factors cause illnesses in animals. Often, when we congregate animals, they are more susceptible to diseases. That was one of the reasons I was opposed to baiting. To me, the disease factor was important," he said.

The deer-baiting controversy also highlighted another of Behnke's characteristics. He tried to stay above politics. His stand on baiting put him in opposition to a man who had appointed him to the Natural Resources Board, then-Gov. Tommy Thompson. "I went to the Joint Finance Committee to testify in opposition to baiting. He (the governor) was really mad," said Behnke.

It wasn't the only time that Behnke disagreed with Thompson. He opposed efforts to make the DNR secretary a gubernatorial appointment and argued that the Natural Resources Board should retain the authority to appoint.

"He (Behnke) came in as a Republican appointee, but it was hard to trace his actions to any one party," said Bob Ellingson, longtime Conservation Department/DNR employee who served as the DNR's Conservation Congress liaison and later chaired the Congress.

Behnke saw that as nothing special, rather a duty of citizen appointees. "I served with 29 different citizens in my time on the commission and board, and I was not aware of one time where anyone cast a partisan vote."

One of his first tastes of citizen engagement came in 1961, when Gov. Gaylord Nelson (a Conservation Hall of Fame inductee) appointed him to the Wolf River Basin Regional Planning Commission. He served the commission until 1967 and carried knowledge gained from that service to the natural resources arena, especially in the areas of conservation and land use.

Behnke's natural resources service began when Gov. Warren Knowles (a Conservation Hall of Fame inductee) appointed him to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1967. When the state conservation and resource development agencies were merged to form the Department of Natural Resources in 1968, Knowles appointed Behnke to the newly formed Natural Resources Board. He served until 1972. He was appointed again by Thompson in 1989 and served until 2006. He chaired the board from 1993 to 1997.

Behnke counts his support for and shepherding of state land acquisitions among his top accomplishments. The DNR controlled 803,554 acres when Behnke was first appointed. By the time he left the board, that total had more than doubled.

One of the areas acquired by the state was the Wolf River Bottomlands near Shiocton. Acquisition of that area was a longtime interest of Behnke's, and the state named a management area on the land after him in 2006. Natural Resources Board Chair O'Brien said at the dedication ceremony: "It is likely that Herb's most long-standing continuing contribution will be his strong support for public land acquisition to protect habitat and provide the public with places to hunt, fish, camp and just be outside."

The state's Nelson-Knowles Stewardship Program for land acquisition propelled land acquisitions, Behnke said. "We bought some great projects," he said, including the Wolf River Bottoms, and the Chippewa, Flambeau and Willow flowages. "Those things were all possible through the Stewardship Program, and if we hadn't had those dollars, those lands would all be developed. I was involved in looking at those projects, inspecting them and recommending them."

Serving on the new Natural Resources Board brought external and internal hurdles. "There were big challenges with point-source pollution and closing dumps across the state. There were also challenges with putting personnel together. It was 'us and them,' " he said.

As a life-long hunter and fisher but also a level-headed supporter of science-based decision-making, Behnke could be counted on to balance science with the needs of state outdoors enthusiasts. "While I was chair, there was a proposal to raise the musky size limit from 30 to 36 inches. We compromised at 32 inches. I vigorously opposed 36 inches. I was criticized by many for taking a position. I said, 'Let's have a size limit, but let's look out for the average guy's interests.' You need to listen to people sometimes.

"I believed in the science of wildlife management tempered with public input. We need to fit the public's interest into the science." Still, Behnke's respect for DNR professionals was unwavering. "I have tremendous respect for DNR field workers. They are just outstanding," he said.

That approach impressed Eisele, who observed Behnke both as a DNR staffer and an independent writer. "I've had the good fortune to watch the board in operation, and Herb Behnke is an excellent example of a board member who cared very deeply about natural resources, worked tirelessly to fulfill his obligations as a board member and kept his ear open to the public as well as DNR employees."

Wisconsin's deer management program has long been controversial. Behnke balanced his respect for the science of deer management with public input. "He asked the DNR and Conservation Congress to work at

developing a long-term solution, which was the Deer 2000 process, one of the largest public participation procedures in natural resources,” recalled Eisele. “He always wanted to know the science behind DNR proposals and always believed that biological information had to be given heavy emphasis, but then the board had to take in consideration public views and make decisions.”

Tom Lyon was chief executive officer of Cooperative Resources International for many years, working closely with Behnke. In addition, Lyon also saw service with an important state policy board – as a member and president of the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents. His reflections provide another look at Behnke’s service:

“Herb was a valued colleague of mine (at CRI) and its predecessor organizations for 25 years. He served as vice president of marketing during periods of great change in the dairy industry,” said Lyon. “Because of his professional interest in agriculture, Herb understands the need for balance between the economic needs of production agriculture and the timber industry, and the greater management of the land and water resources.”

Lyon added: “Herb holds a strong conviction that the preservation of the Wisconsin landscape is in the intelligent best interests of all citizens, and believes that the land should not be used and abused by special interests for economic gain.”

“He understands the role of the citizen appointed policy-making board and elected officials, and the role of trained professionals engaged to carry out the adopted policies. His great frustration has come when these lines have been crossed. He is a visionary who takes the long view, and deplors decisions based upon political expediency,” Lyon added. “Herb Behnke did not have a stage like Professor Aldo Leopold or Senator Gaylord Nelson, but his longtime positive presence in the natural resource policy development arena may have been just as great.”

Colleagues and associates also cite Behnke’s commitment to duty. “He probably dedicated more of his time, efforts and wealth into resource management than anyone I knew,” said Ellingson.

Behnke’s people skills came in handy, too, added Ellingson. “On the Water Pollution Committee, when things would get hot, Herb would always mediate. He was the peacemaker.”

Green Bay State Sen. Rob Cowles said in a newspaper story at the time of Behnke’s retirement: “Herb probably knows as much about our various natural resources as almost anybody – including most of the former secretaries of the DNR.”

Even in retirement, Behnke showed class. As a Republican appointee, he was set to retire when Democrat Jim Doyle was elected governor in 2002. But Doyle talked him into staying on for at least part of his six-year term, and Behnke complied, serving until 2006.

Doyle said of Behnke at the time of his retirement: “Herb Behnke has been a tireless servant to the state of Wisconsin... (He) has guided some of the most important natural resources and environmental policies in recent state history and is highly respected throughout the state. He certainly leaves some big shoes to be filled.”

In recognition of his many years of service, awards flooded in from state groups, including the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, which named him Conservationist of the Year in 2007. Other honors came from the Woodland Chapter of Wisconsin Deerhunters, Wisconsin Duck Hunters, Wisconsin Bow Hunters Association, Trout Unlimited, and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point College of Natural

Resources, which game him its Environmental Leader Award in 2005. He was named to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sports Show Hall of Fame in 2003.

Wisconsin Outdoor Journal named him one of the state's top 20 conservationists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in 2000. His work in the agriculture arena also gained him recognition and honors, including the UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Distinguished Service Award in 2001.

Back home, he received the Shawano Area Distinguished Citizen of the Year Award in 2001.

Behnke remains active in various conservation and civic causes. He is a life member of the Navarino Nature Center in Shawano County, where more than 3,000 students a year gain education about nature. He serves on the board of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin and several wildlife groups and is a professional auctioneer.

## **HERBERT F. BEHNKE**

**1925-**

**BIRTH:** Sept. 11, 1925, in Lena, Wisconsin, son of Reinhold and Julia Behnke

**EDUCATION:** Graduate of Lena High School

Attended management courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

### **PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES**

Career employee of Badgerland Breeders/Midwest Breeders/21<sup>st</sup> Century Genetics/Cooperative Resources International; retired as vice president of marketing

### **ORGANIZATIONS, ACTIVITIES (Current)**

Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin Board of Directors  
Professional auctioneer  
Wisconsin Wildlife Federation  
Trout Unlimited  
Spooner Musky Club  
Navarino Nature Center, life member

### **ORGANIZATIONS, ACTIVITIES (Past)**

National Association of Animal Breeders Board of Directors (President 1982-86)  
Certified Semen Services Board of Directors  
Wisconsin Conservation Commission 1967-68  
Wisconsin Natural Resources Board 1968-72; and 1989-2006  
Wisconsin Natural Resources Board Chair, 1993-97  
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources Advisory Board  
Wolf River Basin Regional Planning Commission, 1961-67  
Wisconsin Conservation Congress, Marinette and Shawano County delegate; member, Executive Council

### **AWARDS, HONORS**

Woodland Chapter Wisconsin Deerhunters Inc. Appreciation Award, 2007  
Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Conservationist of the Year Award, 2007  
Herb Behnke Unit, Lower Wolf River Natural Resources Area dedicated 2006  
Wisconsin Duck Hunters Special Service Award, 2006

Wisconsin Bow Hunters DNR Person of the Year, 2006  
Wisconsin State Council of Trout Unlimited Award of Merit, 2006  
Wisconsin Conservation Congress Appreciation Award, 2006  
UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources Environmental Leader Award, 2005  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sports Show Hall of Fame, 2003  
Wisconsin DNR Division of Forestry Friend of Forestry Award, 2002  
Shawano Area Distinguished Citizen of Year Award, 2001  
UW-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Distinguished Service Award, 2001  
Wisconsin Outdoor Journal Wisconsin Top 20 Conservationists in 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
National Association of Animal Breeders Distinguished Service Award, 1990  
National Agricultural Marketing Association Agri-Marketer of the Year Award, 1989  
Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives Cooperative Builder Award, 1984.

### **SPEECHES**

Numerous speeches to state conservation, wildlife and outdoors groups

### **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Background information for this report came from newspaper and magazine clippings; personal interview with Behnke in 2008; and written communications from/interviews with professional associates Robert Ellingson, former DNR staff member; Tim Eisele, conservation/outdoors writer; and Tom Lyon, retired CEO, Cooperative Resources International. Newspaper accounts include those in the Shawano Leader, Friday, Dec. 23, 2005, and Friday, May 12, 2006; Green Bay Press-Gazette, Jan. 1, 2006; and Peshtigo Times, May 17, 2006.

Bill Berry  
July 2008