

DNR Electronic Digest - March 17, 1999

Former DNR Secretary C. D. “Buzz” Besadny dies

Editor's note: The department is greatly saddened to report the death of former agency secretary C.D. “Buzz” Besadny. Funeral arrangements will be shared in the E-Digest as soon as details are available. Below is information on Besadny's career at the DNR and contributions to the State of Wisconsin.

Retired Natural Resources Secretary Carroll D. “Buzz” Besadny, who died Tuesday, March 16 at the age of 69, was a conservation icon whose 12 years as DNR head earned employee loyalty, bipartisan respect and public trust as Wisconsin's “Father Nature.”

Besadny retired January 8, 1993 after a 40-year career with the Department of Natural Resources and its predecessor, the Wisconsin Conservation Department. Appointed by a citizen board, Besadny earned the respect of the three governors he served – Lee Sherman Dreyfus, Anthony S. Earl and Tommy G. Thompson.

A biologist, Besadny constantly emphasized using science as a key component in natural resources policies and decisions. His tenure was marked by initiatives in groundwater protection, soil erosion control, public land acquisition, toxic substance control, recycling and multiple use forestry.

While in office, the agency made major progress in deer management, turkey reintroduction and pheasant management.

In 1988, the Wisconsin magazine of The Milwaukee Journal dubbed Besadny Wisconsin's “Father Nature,” a title that stuck. Besadny, The Journal said, was “Wisconsin personified, a solid citizen who tells homey stories about himself, thinks before he talks, takes his time to consider all sides, then makes up his mind, digs in and holds his ground.”

While DNR Secretary, Besadny was chosen by his counterparts in other states and the federal government to represent them at national and international levels. President George Bush appointed Besadny to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in 1990.

After his announced retirement, DNR employees turned out in force throughout the state for sentimental farewells. One autumn day in Madison, DNR employees carrying supportive banners and signs of endearment quietly gathered below his fifth floor office windows and, in unison, shouted for their boss to join them.

Hearing the commotion, and expecting to see a capital city protest on the plaza, a surprised Besadny momentarily lost his accustomed reserved demeanor as the outpouring of affection and support overcame him.

Since retirement, Besadny collected numerous honors from the organizations he worked with and sometimes opposed on program or policy matters. One, the Conservation Congress, which Besadny sometimes challenged, called him the "ultimate professional." Another, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, honored him through a conservation college scholarship in his name. In 1997, Besadny was awarded the coveted Wisconsin Idea Award for his support of university-state government cooperation to benefit the people of Wisconsin.

Volunteer work with his local library, reading, his grandchildren and a limited assignment to help improve management practices at the State Investment Board occupied Besadny following retirement.

Besadny joined the department in June 1952 as a research project and unit leader, conducting field wildlife research projects. He then served as a research project leader, game farm resource group leader, research coordinator, director of the Bureau of Environmental Impact and administrator of the Division of Resource Management. He was appointed DNR Secretary in 1980 by the state Natural Resources Board, and served in that capacity until his retirement in early 1993.

A native of Kewaunee, Besadny earned his bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in wildlife management from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara, four children and grandchildren.

Besadny - Characterizations

Paul G. Hayes, writing for the Milwaukee Journal, called him "Father Nature."

Governor Lee Sherman Dreyfus called him a "bureaucrat in the best professional sense."

Stanton P. Helland, then Chairman of the Natural Resources Board, called him a "resource management professional's professional."