

Wisconsin County Forests Association

Norman Bickford
President
Webster, Wisconsin

Tom Rudolph
Vice President
Rhineland, Wisconsin

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Treasurer
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Director
Thorp, Wisconsin

Michael Luedeke
Director-at-Large
Spooner, Wisconsin

Henry Schienebeck
Director-at-Large
Butternut, Wisconsin

Jane Severt, Executive Director
3243 Golf Course Road
P.O. Box 70
Rhineland, WI 54501

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Wisconsin County Forests Association
Concerns with Proposed FY2016 - FY2017
Wisconsin State Budget

County Forest Administration Grant

We appreciate Governor Walker's desire to responsibly manage state tax dollars. However, we feel there was a misunderstanding regarding exactly how large of an impact would be felt by our member counties with the targeted elimination of WDNR "capacity" grants.

Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) represents the forestry interests of 29 counties with lands enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (state statutes §28.10 and §28.11). Collectively our member counties manage nearly 2.4 million acres of forest lands, the largest public ownership in the state. §28.10 and the opening paragraph of §28.11 read as follows;

28.10 County forests. The county board of any county may by resolution establish a county public forest and acquire land by tax deed or otherwise for that purpose.

28.11 Administration of county forests.

(1) Purpose. The purpose of this section is to provide the basis for a permanent program of county forests and to enable and encourage the planned development and management of the county forests for optimum production of forest products together with recreational opportunities, wildlife, watershed protection and stabilization of stream flow, giving full recognition to the concept of multiple-use to assure maximum public benefits; to protect the public rights, interests and investments in such lands; **and to compensate the counties for the public uses, benefits and privileges these lands provide; all in a manner which will provide a reasonable revenue to the towns in which such lands lie.** (Emphasis added)

Our county forests are working forests. Our sustainable forest management practices provide income to offset local tax levies. Our recreation programs are second to none and have been widely recognized for their societal benefits. Our large blocks of forests provide ecological benefits at a landscape level. There is no doubt our county forests are generous contributors to Wisconsin's forest products industry and to the healthy lifestyle many Wisconsin citizens chose to enjoy.

Throughout the years Wisconsin's forestry mil tax (segregated funds) has afforded a variety of grant opportunities to Wisconsin's County Forests meeting the state's statutory obligation contained in §28.11(1). During times of across the board state budget cuts and also during WDNR Division of Forestry Strategic Planning process our county forests have been asked to prioritize funding they receive from the state's forestry mil tax receipts. Our County Forest Administration Grant has always topped the list during these exercises.

For decades the County Forest Administrator Grant has provided funding to counties who employ a 4-year degreed professional forester in the position of county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator. The grant covers 50% of the salary and up to 50% of the benefits for these positions. These grant requests currently stand at \$1.2 - \$1.3 million dollars and are extremely important to our member counties.

Approximately six years ago a change occurred to the County Forest Administrator Grant Program to include the following provision:

28.11 (5m)(am) The department may make grants, from the appropriation under s. 20.370 (5) (bw), to counties having lands entered under sub. (4) to fund up to 50 percent of the costs of a county's annual dues to a nonprofit organization that provides leadership and counsel to that county's forest administrator and that functions as an organizational liaison to the department. The total amount that the department may award in grants under this paragraph in any fiscal year may not exceed \$50,000.

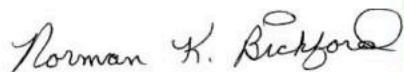
This provision was added to accommodate WCFA's growth and movement forward as WCFA's Board of Directors chose to hire a professional forester to serve and lead their organization in service as executive director. This addition to our County Forest Administrator Grant Program fell under the label of "capacity" grant even though funding for this portion of the grant is capped at \$50,000 and comingled with original county forest administration grant dollars.

Governor Walker's proposed budget targets removal of the \$50,000 portion of our County Forest Administrator Grant Program. However, the budget document has removed language for the entire program effectively eliminating the mechanism for awarding traditional county forest administrator grants of \$1.2 - \$1.3 million along with the \$50,000 grant for organizational dues payment.

We are respectfully requesting Wisconsin's Joint Committee on Finance to reinstate funding and language in The State of Wisconsin's FY16 – FY17 Biennial Budget allowing for full funding of Wisconsin's County Forest Administrator Grant Program.

If we can be of further assistance or provide additional information please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Sincerely,



Norman K. Bickford, President
Wisconsin County Forests Association



Jane F. Severt, Executive Director
Wisconsin County Forests Association