

**Minnesota Conservation Federation
Legislative Report
Gary Botzek, Executive Director
June 2010**

Summer is here! The Legislature is not!!

It was a tough session in many ways. Good hard nosed politics regarding the budget and the deficit. The Governor appears to have won the battle but the war rages on. Now the battles have moved to the election fields where Minnesotan's will select its leadership for the next two and four years. New leaders will hopefully mean new ideas and hopefully more ability to work together to move Minnesota out of the economic downturn, out of debt and back to more job production.

In regard to conservation and environmental legislation this past session, a number of positive funding and policy issues were taken care of and there was a bit of controversy at the very end of the session with the omnibus game and fish bill getting vetoed by the Governor.

Here is a summary:

Lessard Council/Dedicated Sales Tax dollars:

Nearly \$60 million from the dedicated sales tax was passed and signed into law under Chapter 361. The money was added to a larger bill and became an omnibus environment, energy and natural resources policy and funding bill.

There is money for prairie restoration, aquatic habitat, land restoration and forest-related projects. Over 16,000 acres would be protected; 6,700 through easements and 9,800 through acquisition. Over 42,000 acres would be enhanced; 4,700 acres would be restored and over 100 miles of shoreline protection. Each \$1 in state money would be matched with 63 cents from local efforts. 82 counties would have a project including all seven metro counties where 20% of the money would be spent. This is now the second year of Lessard funding and is exactly what the voters expected to see done with this new money when they voted for the Dedicated Sales Tax Constitutional Amendment in 2008.

The controversy surrounding the definitions of "enhance, restore and protect" agreed to late last session were repealed thanks to strong leadership by the Senate. With the repeal, the Lessard Council will once again work from the stricter definitions and be able to better target these dollars to habitat, conservation and environmental stewardship. The definitions to be used are now the same definitions that the voters voted for in 2008!

LCCMR Funds from Lottery Dollars:

A new law, Chapter 362, will provide \$26 million from state lottery ticket purchases to be invested by state and local conservation organizations that continue to support the mission of the Environmental Trust Fund which is in its second 25 year cycle. The Legislative Citizens Commission on Minnesota's Resources recommended forty-eight projects including natural resources data and information, land, habitat, and recreation, water resources, aquatic and terrestrial invasive species, renewable energy, and environmental education.

An amendment added by Rep. Tom Rukavina (D-Virginia) on the House floor was removed in conference committee. The amendment would have redirected \$4.2 million from proposed land acquisition toward state parks improvements. The Senate did not add this language. Compromise language added in conference committee redirected some unspent money to state parks for solar and other park improvements.

State DNR land acquisition for conservation purposes has become a very difficult effort at the State Capitol. An Office of the Legislative Auditor's report, released in March, contains strong concerns and recommendations regarding DNR's ability to manage the lands it already owns. Add to that the fact of a major general fund deficit and the ability to buy private land for state ownership and use has become more targeted and tough to do.

Bonding for RIM:

The bonding bill passed in the middle of the legislative session contained \$25 million in state bonds for the state Reinvest-In-Minnesota (RIM) reserve private lands wetland restoration program. This program, administered by the Board of Soil & Water Resources and the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts works with farmers and other land owners to "retire" select agricultural land that is low land and seasonally wet or otherwise best suited for wildlife and birds. The federal government is working on rules from the last Farm Bill and would have provided federal matching dollars to each state dollar committed to the program. However, the Governor chose to veto this appropriation. Many conservation and environmental groups, including the MCF, worked for the rest of the session to produce a second bonding bill which would include RIM. It never did happen.

Game and Fish Controversy:

Each year the legislature assembles an omnibus game and fish bill with a variety of issues and policy changes to our hunting and angling statutes and rules. This year these matters appeared to be landing in SF2900-Senator Chaudhary (D-Fridley) and HF3124-Rep. Dill (D-Crane Lake).

The House bill includes elimination of the height restrictions for tree deer stands, changes in the muskrat, mink, otter, and beaver season in the forest trapping zone, would allow anglers to purchase a second license for \$10 to fish with two lines, allow counties to offer a bounty on taking coyotes, and allow spearing for northern pike in Cass Lake.

The Senate bill would restrict recreational feeding of wildlife from Sept. 1 to Dec. 31, contains a number of youth hunting provisions, standardizes tree stands at 16 feet for all big game, requires that hunters be 20 feet from a vehicle before shooting at a grouse, removes the requirement that the waterfowl season not open before the Saturday closest to Oct. 1, and would create a variety of rules for the 2010 3A deer season.

SF2900 also contained a fishing license increase in order to pay for the youth hunting changes and other youth angling changes. That provision was removed on the Senate floor by amendment. The bill also provided for a two-year pilot walk-in program for hunters on private property.

The two bills passed late in the session and were in conference committee that last weekend of the session. In the conference committee the Senate agreed to House language that provides for a change in lake fisheries management on Fish Lake Reservoir located near Duluth. Senator Chaudhary had not added this provision in his senate bill and had asked Rep. Dill to add in on to the House bill during debate on the bill on the House floor. While Senator Chaudhary announced to the conference committee and attendees in the audience that night that he owned a cabin on that lake, he was announcing that fact in advance of the final vote and agreement and defended

the law change due to a letter he had received from a county commissioner in support of the law change. It was during that conference committee that the DNR produced a lengthy letter expressing concerns over a number of provisions in both bills. Many of the provisions were moved into the final version of SF2900. Also included in SF2900 was the “lands bill”, which contained 40-50 different transfers of land from the state DNR to local governments.

The agreed to SF2900/Chapter 390 was then repassed by the House and the Senate and sent to the Governor. DNR recommended that the Governor veto the bill which he did. One of the reasons for the veto was the Fish Lake Reservoir controversy.

Since that veto, Senator Chaudhary was brought up before the Senate Ethics Committee and was reprimanded for his actions. Back home in Fridley, some of the DFL leadership is not happy about the performance of the 3rd term senator and is now considering taking the party endorsement away from Chaudhary. A former house member files against Senator Chaudhary on the last day of filing and a primary battle is on toward the August 10 primary date.

Campaign Trails:

Campaigns for Governor, totaling five candidates, as well as races in all 201 House and Senate seats are under way. They are asking for your support. Much of the campaign will focus on reforms that are needed in order to make our state government work better.

I have seen many bills get passed and signed into law. I have also seen many bills get vetoed for one reason or another. One thing I do know for sure is that the larger a bill gets in terms of subjects or issues it attempts to address, change and include, the more likely it is to get vetoed. Many items in the “omnibus” game and fish deserved to be signed into law. Some did not. The land bill portion of the omnibus bill was never an issue. Why does the land bill have to be held hostage to the game and fish bill?

My reform plans calls for the land bill to be kept separate from the game and fish bill. Different bill numbers and different authors. Get it done!

My second reform suggests that the game and fish bill be divided into two separate bills; one dealing with angling issues and one dealing with hunting issues. Separate bill numbers and difference authors.

My third reform would call for all three of the bills mentioned above to be considered by the legislature earlier in the year. There is no reason that these “policy” bills need to be held until the last hour of the last day in order to get it done!

Three small easy changes. A lot of people would be a lot happier in June under this reform model. Too many train cars hooked onto the same train can and did derail the entire train—including all the cars!

The MCF will continue to stay involved in the policy and funding decisions made at the State Capitol regarding conservation and the environment. The MCF just held its quarterly meeting on June 12 at the Lakeview Gander Mountain. We will be holding are annual meeting in Austin, MN on September 12-13. Join us!

If you have questions about the MCF and our priorities, please call me at 651-293-9295 or email me at gary@capitolconnections.com. Be sure to visit our website at www.mncf.org.

