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EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL

As DNR woes grow, former critic says she's its best protector

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Cathy Stepp, a Republican stalwart who has led the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources through five years that have included staffing cuts and relaxed pollution regulations, says she is uniquely equipped to protect the agency and the environment.



Video: DNR must give up on some areas in order to keep focus on higher priorities Feb 24, 2016

A small snake was instrumental in the narrow view Cathy Stepp adopted regarding state Department of Natural Resources employees years before she was appointed to lead the agency.

Stepp was a builder of custom homes in 1997 when the state placed the Butler's garter snake on its threatened species list. She heard countless complaints at builders association meetings about how DNR protection of the reptile was complicating the business.



Board asks why DNR hasn't fixed water pollution flaws

In 2000, Stepp landed a seat as a Republican appointee on the DNR's policy board, but it wasn't until her 2002 election to the state Senate that she started swinging hard at the agency and its workers for what she saw as their anti-business practices.

She fought to streamline environmental regulations, earned a "zero" rating from conservationists, gathered testimony about overzealous DNR employees, and authored a bill to criminalize state worker "retaliation" against companies seeking pollution permits.



Fines for pollution fell to 30-year low in 2015

Frustrated by the slow pace of change, Stepp left the Senate when her four-year term ended. She worked for Republican causes until 2011 when the party took control of state government, and Gov. Scott Walker appointed her as the DNR's top administrator.

Now, as DNR secretary, Stepp has come under fire from conservation groups for her handling of emerging pollution problems and not publicly advising the Legislature against cuts made to the DNR budget and changes in environmental regulations.

Waving off mounting signs that the agency's enforcement of existing laws has faltered, top Republican leaders say they are focused of easing unneeded burdens on private companies. And they say they are unreservedly happy with Stepp.

For her part, Stepp insists she remains uniquely qualified to represent the agency before a Legislature that is skeptical of the way it protects the state's air, water, wildlife and other natural resources.

Among her qualifications she lists her record of self-described "strident" criticism of DNR employees — for example, her sarcastic 2009 blog entry calling them anti-business, cubicle-bound bureaucrats who develop "outrageous" ideas people in the "real world have to contend with."

In an interview in her Madison office last week, Stepp said her well-known antipathy for the DNR helps her win over GOP skeptics.

"I think I have a lot of credibility there because my former colleagues certainly know where I was coming from," Stepp said. "So they say 'If Cathy thinks this is OK and she's



DNR concedes its rules are faulty, then allows more frac sand mining



EPA to impose pollution rules if Wisconsin doesn't make changes in two years

DNR secretary says feds 'are over-reaching' in closing state-managed lands



Video: Employee says DNR should use scientific surveys to inform reorganization plans
Feb 24, 2016



Video: DNR must find ways to deal with shrinking workforce and growing workload
Feb 24, 2016



2009 Cathy Stepp blog post
Steven Verburg | Wisconsin State Journal
Jun 24, 2016

comfortable, then I feel comfortable because I know where Cathy was coming from before.”

Stepp’s critics scoff, saying she and the Legislature are far too comfortable with deteriorating enforcement of pollution laws.

They point to her policy that ended the DNR’s practice of pushing back publicly against proposed laws agency scientists see as harmful. Department leaders haven’t openly fought budget cuts like the ones that wiped away nearly 200 positions since 2011 including last year’s loss of 93 senior scientists, educators, foresters and others.

“When things are proposed in the Legislature that are very damaging to the environment, you have to have the secretary out there saying, ‘It’s still your decision, Legislature, but here are the ramifications,’” said George Meyer, executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and a former DNR secretary.

Stepp said she fights for the DNR behind the scenes, and her top administrators have said they have quietly stopped budget cuts that would have been worse than those enacted in 2015. Out of respect for the lawmakers involved, Stepp said, she won’t detail those proposals.

“We have made terrific inroads with some the toughest critics in the Legislature against this agency who have a very skewed perception of who makes up this agency,” Stepp said.

The agency must be apolitical publicly, deferring to elected officials, Stepp said. As DNR secretary she said she has no opinion on whether environmental regulations are excessive or inadequate. The DNR’s job is to put the law into practice, she said.

Conservationists point to failings in water quality enforcement documented by the state’s nonpartisan audit bureau and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Stepp says she has been hobbled for five years by organizational problems she inherited, and state work rules that slow hiring of key personnel.

But she claims progress in her primary mission — better customer service. She exhorts employees to address the public with an unfailingly pleasant tone and a full willingness to explain.

“Some people misconstrued that, at least early on, to infer that it means something that it doesn’t mean: saying yes to every question you are asked, granting every permit that’s applied for,” Stepp said. “What it’s really about is being able to speak to people the way they speak to each other, being able to help people comply with the rules and explain the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ that we do.”

Stepp acknowledged that poor customer service can often be traced to chronic staff shortages had have left employees overwhelmed by heavy workloads. This summer she plans to reveal a comprehensive plan aimed at coming to their rescue.

Snake made impression

Stepp said her initial view of the DNR — and its employees — was shaped by her time as a builder in Racine County when other builders in southeastern Wisconsin were frustrated because their developments were complicated by DNR activities such as the protection of the endangered Butler’s garter snake.

As Stepp has molded the DNR, she has changed the way she speaks about the DNR employees she once openly ridiculed.

“I actually apologized to my staff at all supervisors meetings a few years ago about the comments I made because I painted with such a broad brush, and it was unfair, and was myopic,” Stepp said.

In five years, DNR employees have taken her to visit a bear den, on tours of forestry sites and on ride-alongs with game wardens, allowing her to see how multi-faceted the agency is. And she has learned more about the science, laws and rules behind regulations.

“I am a far more enriched person than I ever could have imagined being at this time in my life,” Stepp said.

Still, she stands by other seemingly harsh comments she has made more recently. In employee meetings she has referred to some DNR activities as beloved but nonessential “glitter and rainbows.” In a videotaped management seminar in Florida, she described difficulty remaking the DNR, saying she has needed to tell employees that “deer and the butterflies and clean air and clean water ... don’t pay taxes and they don’t sign our paychecks.”

Stepp's words and the belief of some employees that she hasn't defended them has spurred employee departures and a huge drain of expertise, several critics said.

"It's heartbreaking," said Kimberlee Wright, a former DNR attorney and now the director of Midwest Environmental Advocates, whose petition for federal intervention to fix state water pollution flaws drew signatures of more than 50 agency retirees.

"She was making fun of staff," Wright said of Stepp. "Oh, hey, you care about some little bug.' They are talented professionals and they deserve respect."

Stepp said employees tell her that department morale is higher than ever. They understand that her remarks mean the agency must set realistic goals and take a practical, customer-oriented approach to its core mission of protecting resources, Stepp said.

Sprawling reach

The DNR has long been a lightning rod, drawing complaints from hunters who fail to bag deer, businesses subject to regulations, homeowners downwind of sand mines, and conservationists who are alarmed about waters that are polluted or simply drying up.

The agency's full-time work-force has declined 15 percent in the last two decades under both Democratic and Republican administrations. During Stepp's tenure, a shrinking workforce collided with rapid expansion of industries the DNR regulates.

An explosion of industrial frac sand mining has fouled streams and raised worries about air pollution as the department struggled to write adequate permit rules. Rapid growth of large feedlots, manure spills and high-capacity well drilling are linked to tainted drinking water and widespread limitations on use of lakes and streams.

A recurring theme is inadequate staffing dating back at least a decade.

Stepp and her top administrators have been working for a year to document what each DNR employee does and how those duties are responsive to federal and state mandates.

Soon the department will unveil plans created with staff input for shedding unneeded activities and shifting resources to where they are needed, she said.

She tells DNR employees they've been asked to do more with less for too long.

"This is a collective work product to give them the relief that they have been begging for for fourteen years," Stepp said. "Finally they have a secretary that is willing to acknowledge it."

The "core work analysis" document will also help lawmakers understand the effects of any proposed budget cuts in the future.

"When they say they want to cut staff, I will have the list of things that they will no longer get done in legislators' back yards, and they can make better educated decisions," Stepp said.

"Now (if) I ask for more staff, I will have a business reason why," Stepp said. "I have the documentation to back it up. That's the best way to advocate for staff."

Answering questions about water program problems at a meeting of the policy-making Natural Resources Board last week, Stepp said it's possible she could ask Walker to propose more staffing in the 2017-2019 budget, but she was sensitive to the needs of other departments.

"Thanks to Cathy Stepp's strong leadership, the DNR's mission is to enforce our laws, work proactively with citizens to avoid violations, and take a common sense approach in balancing economic growth with environmental protection," said Walker spokesman Tom Evenson.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, said he has been pleased with Stepp's work.

"You don't just walk in the front door of that agency and make all the changes overnight because you have to be sensitive to the concerns of the people in that agency," Fitzgerald said in an interview. "It doesn't happen overnight, but ultimately you reach the goals the governor has set."

In 2013, the Natural Resources Board removed the Butler's garter snake from the state's list of threatened species. Stepp signed off on the change, but said the proposal was generated