

JANUARY 2010 NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION (NRC) MEETING

This was the last meeting of the NRC under the old rules and there was a lot of concern about how the NRC would fit into the new consolidated structure. At that time, the Governor had not named a director to the consolidated department and there was a lot of concern that we might lose Director Humphries. As we now know, and to our relief, she has been named to that post. And from what I have gathered so far, the process and responsibilities of the NRC are also likely to continue. Of course, it will take a few years before all this washes out, including the impact of a new governor.

The allocation of the funds remains a major concern. The old DEQ was funded mostly from the general fund while the old DNR was funded almost exclusively from hunter and angler monies, all of which are under constitutional spending restrictions. The question is: How do we prevent the restricted funds from being spent outside the restrictions?

A number of the assignments in the Department of Natural Resources-Environment (DNRE) oversee both resource and environmental areas. The appropriate distribution of funds could become rather arbitrary unless strict rules are put in place. This is a particular problem in the management areas where the distinction between resource and environment may not be very clear. It would be easy, and we can anticipate it happening, for the legislature to cut general funding and force the DNRE to do the job anyway. I am sure we don't want the environment to be ignored. I am equally sure we don't want resource funding to pay for it.

Related to this, funding-wise, there was discussion about the Deer Range Improvement Program fund (DRIP). It seems as though some DRIP funds were spent on jack pine in the Kirkland Warbler area and were touted to be deer range improvement - not the best bang for the buck. Some publications called this a misappropriation of funds. Actually it was an error in judgment influenced by some matching Fed money. We were assured that this would be prevented in the future.

This is an example of how funds can be redirected. My question is: How can I tell who spent the funds and on what? Being somewhat

familiar with the financial activity, I am not sure the DNRE can answer that question. The main reason is because of the number of restricted funds and the volume of items involved. The detail necessary would be overwhelming. So what do we do? First I would like to see how the funding is to be separated - what is the procedure used to apply the monies to a restricted funds? Given that and given that it is an audit requirement; I may be satisfied with an annual review of the who's, what's and where's. The problem with an annual review is once something gets in place it's hard to correct it and how do we recover erroneous spending. These reviews tend to be well after the fact so there would be two years of an error, if one existed. Maybe there needs to be some other review process. I am sure we don't want to spend a lot of money on this reporting mechanism that could be spent in the field. The DNRE folks I talk to are well aware of our concerns and are working to alleviate them. I am anticipating that the process will have a lot of public input and the eventual results well publicized.

I am not all that worried about some occasional or accidental misuse of funds; the DNRE folks are very conscientious about doing the right thing. I am, however, quite worried about what our legislatures will do to save general fund money for use on their pet projects. The natural resources of this state are what make Michigan, Michigan, and I don't think they get it. That's quite apparent from the from the proposed legislation currently pending - both the pushing of the undesired and the preventing of the desired. The natural resource issues should take a high priority in the next election. We should not accept campaign promises but require campaign commitments - in writing.

As you may have determined by now there wasn't a lot of excitement at the meeting. Not that the presenters didn't try and not that the information presented wasn't important, it was sort of under a cloud with the effects of the consolidation on everybody's mind.

Jim De Clerck