

Contacts: Denny Caneff, Executive Director
River Alliance of Wisconsin
(608) 257-2424, ext 115

Andrew Hanson, Attorney
Midwest Environmental Advocates
(608) 251-5047, ext 2

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44 Conservation Organizations Petition DNR to Keep Northern Rivers Clean

MADISON - The River Alliance of Wisconsin, joins a coalition of local and statewide conservation organizations, calls for more protection of Wisconsin's northern rivers with the *Northwoods Hundred Healthiest Rivers Campaign*. The groups petitioned the Natural Resources Board, the governing body of the Department of Natural Resources, to increase protection of 100 river segments in northern Wisconsin for future generations. To view a list of those segments and a slide presentation, visit www.midwestadvocates.org or www.wisconsinrivers.org.

Midwest Environmental Advocates prepared the petition in collaboration with the River Alliance when the organizations analyzed Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) information that showed that some high quality waters did not have the legal protection needed to limit pollution into those waters.

"These rivers deserve recognition as some of the healthiest rivers in Wisconsin," said Denny Caneff, Executive Director of the River Alliance. "We support this petition because it makes sense – protect the great rivers we have, before it is too late. That means placing legal limits on pollution *before* it occurs, and educating the public about our great water resources."

"This petition to the Natural Resources Board joins economic health and water quality in Wisconsin's northwoods," said Caneff. "This is about improving Wisconsin's economy by protecting and restoring the best, most important rivers in Wisconsin for future tourism and recreation."

The DNR gathered the information on Wisconsin's most pristine rivers as part of the Northern Rivers Initiative. The DNR began the Initiative in 1997 in response to growing public concern about overdevelopment and declining water quality in northern Wisconsin. As part of the Northern Rivers Initiative, the DNR evaluated 1,494 rivers and river segments in Wisconsin's 20 northern-most counties.

"The DNR has the information it needs to protect these rivers," said Melissa K. Scanlan, Executive Director of Midwest Environmental Advocates. "The challenge for the Natural Resources Board is to turn that information into action – and get these rivers the legal protection they deserve," she added.

In the petition, a coalition of 44 conservation and environmental organizations identifies the top 100 river segments in Wisconsin's northwoods, and requests that the DNR use its data to upgrade legal protections for those rivers. The enhanced protection will limit pollution that harms fish and wildlife, and will help to safeguard our waters for Wisconsin residents and for our valuable tourism economy. The petition will also help the DNR honor treaty rights held by Chippewa Tribes to hunt and fish in areas that were ceded to the federal government. Several tribal governments have passed formal resolutions supporting the petition.

FAST FACTS

- Midwest Environmental Advocates is a non-profit, public interest environmental law center that provides legal representation and community organizing assistance to groups that are working for clean air, clean water, and environmental justice. For more information visit www.midwestadvocates.org or call (608) 251-5047 ext. 0.
- The River Alliance of Wisconsin is a non-profit, non-partisan group of 2,000 citizens, organizations and businesses dedicated to advocating for the protection, enhancement and restoration of our rivers and watersheds. For more information visit www.wisconsinrivers.org or call (608) 257-2424.
- Protecting Northern Wisconsin rivers is good for local economies. A 1995 Natural Resources Board Report found that high water quality contributes significantly to local economies. For example, tourism activities in Marinette County in 1993 generated \$42.7 million and 1,135 full-time equivalent jobs from a work force of more than 16,000. Tourism in northern Wisconsin is dependent on Wisconsin's high quality waters.
- The federal Clean Water Act requires the DNR to protect and restore the highest quality waters in Wisconsin. The DNR does so by classifying our rivers, streams, and lakes as Outstanding or Exceptional Resource Waters. These classifications give the DNR authority to limit pollution from grading and dredging on river banks, from sewage and industrial sources of pollution, or from depletion by high capacity groundwater wells.
- In 1997, the DNR launched the Northern Rivers Initiative to review existing water quality information on 1,494 stream segments in 20 northern Wisconsin counties. The purpose of the effort was to identify high quality streams and riparian areas for future protection.
- The River Alliance of Wisconsin reviewed the Northern Rivers Initiative data and found that many of the high quality waters identified there by DNR have higher water quality than many of the northern waters currently classified as Outstanding or Exceptional Resource Waters.
- Despite this finding, the DNR has not given greater protection for these higher quality rivers and streams. Currently, those high quality rivers can be degraded significantly before a response from the DNR is legally required.
- It is currently the goal of Wisconsin, as stated in Wis. Stat. § 283.001(a), not to allow any more polluted discharges into the waters of the State; this petition gets us closer to achieving this goal.
- The River Alliance of Wisconsin, Midwest Environmental Advocates and 42 other local and statewide conservation organizations have petitioned the DNR to keep northern rivers clean by assigning Outstanding or Exceptional Resource Waters status to 100 of the most pristine waters identified in the Northern Rivers Initiative.

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