

Wisconsin Wetlands

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The magnificent Lower Wisconsin Riverway (pictured)—a 92-mile stretch from the Prairie du Sac dam to the river's confluence with the Mississippi River—has been nominated for designation as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. That nomination is in the final stages of review and we expect to be able to announce the official designation soon! The site includes 45,000 acres of the Wisconsin River, tributary streams, backwater wetlands, and floodplain habitats. The site also includes nearby uplands that protect the ground and surface waters linked to the health of the river's waters and wildlife. These connections between the river, its wetlands, and its uplands are just a part of the *watershed* of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway. We'll explore watersheds in this issue as the first installment of our focus in this year's newsletters; hydrologic restoration.



Ripple effects

How do seemingly small actions lead to major investments for wetlands? Learn more about exciting developments in our work made possible by your support on page 6.

TIM JACOBSON



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Wetlands**
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From the Director

Repairing Wisconsin's waters

Like many of you, I've spent much of my professional career with soggy feet, exploring wetlands. I've explored healthy wetlands and I've explored places where wetland loss has crippled a watershed's ability to manage the water that flows through it. And I'll tell you, to really understand a landscape with healthy and abundant wetlands, you need to get out of your car (or boat) and navigate on foot. For now, imagine traversing the incredible complexities of the Lower Wisconsin River's floodplains (soon to be declared a Wetland of International Importance!). Silver maple forests tower over a landscape that is so diverse, human machinery could never duplicate it. At one point you're splashing through ankle deep ephemerals. A few feet beyond that you're "swimming" through deep sediment in an oxbow wetland without ever touching firm ground. Later, you're crawling over and under downed woody snags and getting lost in thick stands of buttonbush.

Historically, 25-30% of Wisconsin was wetland. That's one wet foot for every three or four steps taken. In Wisconsin's contemporary and altered landscape, where we've lost half of our wetlands, it's difficult to comprehend the sheer quantity of wetlands we had historically across the state. Difficult, but not impossible. When you're immersed in the vast floodplain forests of the Lower Wisconsin River, or circumnavigating beaver-created and ephemeral wetlands in Price County, you can begin to understand what we've lost.

I talk about this because our legacy of wetland loss has affected nearly every aspect of our modern landscape. If you read WWA's newsletters regularly, you've heard us say how our wetland loss contributes to water quality impairment; groundwater depletion; fish and wildlife population declines; flooding, roadway, and infrastructure damage; and many other important issues our communities face. So, how do we turn this around?

In a nutshell, we need the right amounts of the right kinds of wetlands in the right locations to address our water-related needs. A \$10 label for this is watershed-based "hydrologic restoration," which, simply put, literally means "fixing the water." Wetlands aren't the only things we need to fix our waters, but we can't fix our waters without wetlands. If we don't fix the water first, many of our other actions may end up as nothing more than temporary bandages treating symptoms caused by watershed-scale hydrologic alteration. Because the need to employ watershed-based hydrologic restoration actions across the state is so great, we are devoting this year's issues of our newsletter to presenting the basic principles of watershed processes and hydrologic restoration.

In this issue, we're sharing "How Wetlands Manage Water," an overview of a key concept in hydrologic restoration: the watershed. In later issues, you'll read about how landscape changes affect how water flows across our landscapes, how degraded hydrology contributes to flooding, and how we can work together to apply wetlands as solutions to the flooding and other water problems we face in Wisconsin. And you can join us at the 2021 Wetland Science Conference for a special symposium on hydrologic restoration.

Thank you for helping us build an understanding of how wetlands can be solutions to the water issues affecting our communities. And now that the weather's turning warmer, spend a spring afternoon exploring some of our healthier wetland landscapes, such as the Lower Wisconsin River, and imagine what was and what could be if we all work together.



WWA poised for 100% success on 2019–2020 policy priorities!

In January 2019, we outlined five proactive policy initiatives for the new legislative session and promised we'd provide quarterly updates via a checklist through the year.

Our 2019-2020 legislative agenda focused on promoting and encouraging wetland restoration to solve problems like flooding, water quality, and degraded habitat. To ensure these efforts were successful in the capital and had strong local engagement, we also emphasized legislator education and building partnerships.

We're thrilled to announce that we're close to achieving everything we set out to do and that all of our work is advancing with strong bi-partisan collaboration and support. Here's what we accomplished this year:

✓ **1. Secure funding and partnerships to develop methods to help Lake Superior Basin communities evaluate opportunities to re-establish wetlands to reduce flood risks and damages**

STATUS: *WWA helped Ashland County secure the state's first FEMA grant focused on natural flood management and helped revitalize and secure funding for other partnerships (see page 6 for more details).*

✓ **2. Secure a state budget appropriation for wetland flood storage demonstration projects**

STATUS: *AB 266/SB 252, which provides \$150,000 for wetland flood storage demonstration projects in Ashland County, passed both houses with unanimous support and was signed by the Governor on March 3, 2020.*

✓ **3. Streamline permit review to encourage beneficial wetland restoration projects**

STATUS: *AB 701/SB 631 establishes a new general permit process for hydrologic restoration and creates a Hydrologic Restoration and Management Advisory Council to explore how to better integrate wetland, stream, and floodplain restoration into state and local programs. It passed the Assembly with unanimous support. Given the Governor's efforts to reduce flooding and improve water quality, and assuming the Senate approves the bill without amendments before the end of the session, it is likely to receive the Governor's support.*

✓ **4. Lobby to improve access to wetland spatial data**

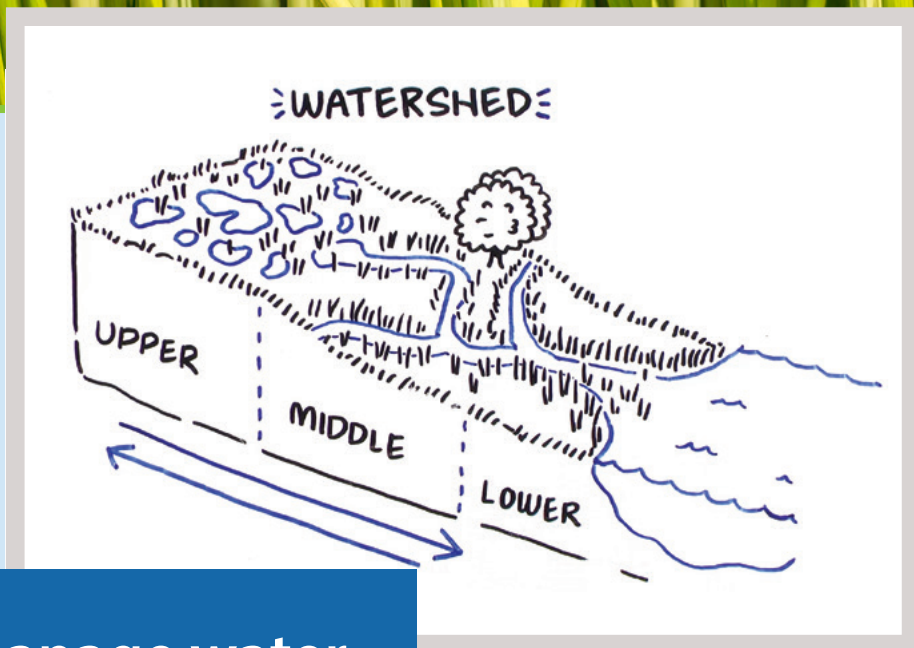
STATUS: *As of February 2019, all Wisconsin Wetland Inventory data are available for free download through ArcGIS. This enables better wetland planning and better access to wetland data for research.*

✓ **5. Educate policy-makers about how wetlands benefit their communities**

STATUS: *Through direct contact with legislators and staff and field-based education, we strengthened relationships with dozens of legislative offices.*

Combining education with legislation produced clear results. The two bills we supported—both of which are receiving strong bipartisan support—gave every Wisconsin legislator and the Governor the chance to say yes to wetlands at least twice (authors, sponsors, and committee members were even more engaged). Both pieces of legislation will help improve wetland practices and encourage wetland restoration across the state.

There's much to celebrate and many to thank, especially all of you who called and wrote to your elected officials. You can help us build on this momentum by contacting them one more time to thank them for their sponsorship and/or votes (see insert) and for recognizing the importance of wetlands as solutions to today's water management problems.



How wetlands manage water

Do you remember fishing with your grandpa? Catching frogs at the water's edge? Some of these precious childhood memories of nature tie back to wetlands.

Wetlands occur between the places that are always wet and the places that are always dry. Not only do they give us great memories, they also protect the health and safety of our communities. They reduce flood damages, help keep our waters clean, and ensure we have water to drink and use in our businesses.

But the ability of wetlands to provide these benefits depends on how we use and manage our land and water. Across much of the state, the changes we have made to our landscape have disrupted this ability. And as a result, we're seeing more flood damages and water quality problems.

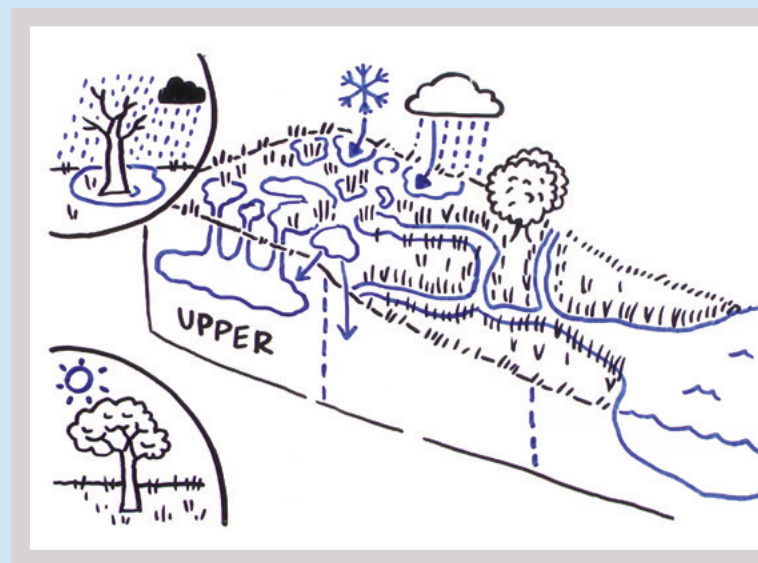
The good news is that wetlands can be an important part of the solutions to these problems. And by understanding how wetlands work, we can begin the exciting process of restoring wetlands to help heal Wisconsin's waters.

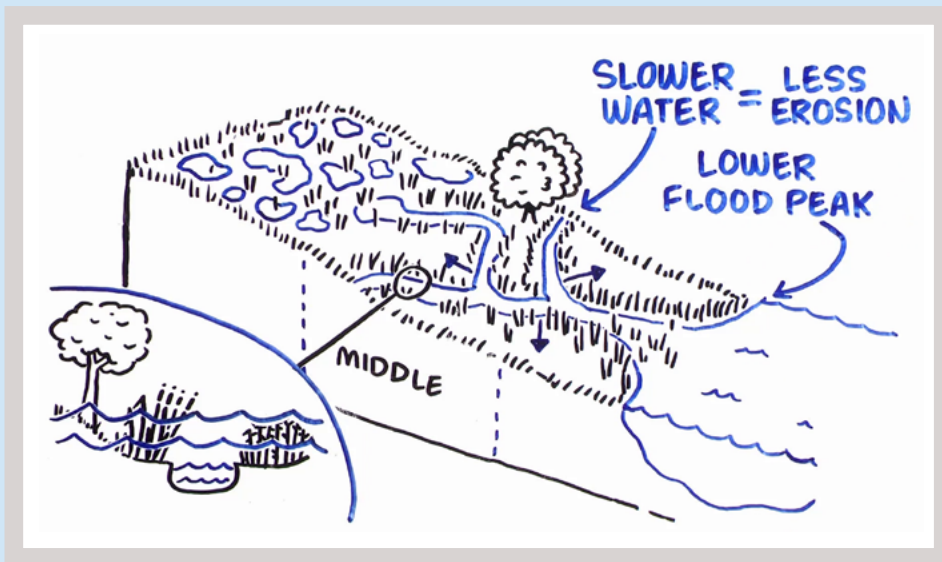
Because water flows downhill, we can't fix issues downstream if we don't fix problems upstream. So let's start at the top and look at how it's all connected...the watershed.

A **watershed** is an area where all surface waters—lakes, rivers, streams, *and* wetlands—drain to a shared body of water. But wetlands in different parts of a watershed manage water in different ways.

Wetlands in **the upper parts of a watershed** form in low spots on the land. These wetlands capture, store, and slowly release runoff from rain and snowmelt. They may not always look like wetlands—they're wet in the spring and dry by late summer—and often they don't even appear to be connected to streams or rivers, but they are critical.

Here's how: individually, these wetlands may be small, but they can be locally abundant. Together, they hold and manage a lot of water and literally slow the flow, allowing the water to soak into the ground. This reduces erosion and flood peaks and helps protect downstream roads and neighborhoods.





Wetlands in **the middle part of a watershed** form along rivers and creeks, giving them room to swell during high water. They are most commonly known as floodplain wetlands.

When floodwaters spread out across a floodplain they slow down and spread out. Slower-moving water has less erosion-causing energy. And water that can spread out means lower flood peaks downstream.

Wetlands in the **lower parts of a watershed** form where rivers empty into larger bodies of water, especially lakes. Where rivers flatten out, the current disperses and the river drops its load of sediments and other material. This makes the

water that enters the lake cleaner and clearer, which means better fishing, swimming, and boating.

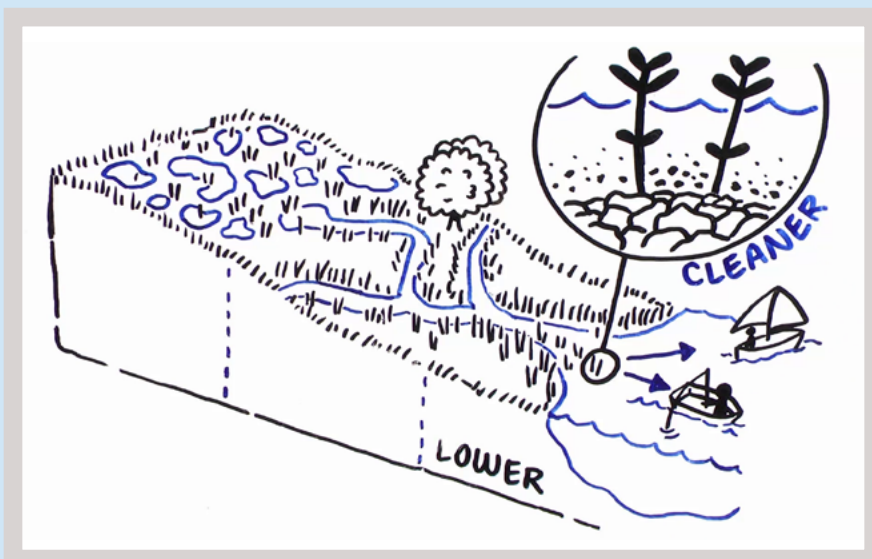
So, are the wetlands near you healthy and abundant enough to support watershed health, or are they too damaged to do the work you need them to do?

If you don't know the answer, you're not alone! But if you're concerned about water quality and flooding and care about fish and wildlife, encouraging your community to explore how local wetlands are—or are not—supporting watershed health is a great place to start.

Working together, we can use wetlands as solutions in our

communities. And at the same time, we can insure that our kids and grandkids create the same treasured childhood memories we hold dear.

Watch the animated version of "How Wetlands Manage Water" online at wisconsinwetlands.org/videos and on April 10th at the Barrymore Theater in Madison, WI, as part of the traveling Wild & Scenic Film Festival. More details on the back page of this newsletter!



Ripple effects:

How your support stimulates major investments in wetlands conservation

You want to protect and restore wetlands and watersheds across Wisconsin, but you know you can't do it alone. You know that you are more powerful when you come together with others who share your passion by joining Wisconsin Wetlands Association.

With your support, WWA works hard for wetlands all across Wisconsin. Your support allows us the opportunity to take time to get to know a local landscape, its people, and its problems; the chance to understand and decide how to effectively address barriers to meaningful wetland conservation action; the time to review the science and relevant policies; and the time to evaluate which ideas and opportunities are ripe for action. Your support makes this critical project "germination period" possible.

For example, this past year, your support enabled us to build political support for an appropriation for wetland restoration demonstration in Ashland County. Read more about this exciting development on page 3.

Your support also ensures that our efforts for wetland conservation grow and reach well beyond WWA, because we can't do what needs to be done for Wisconsin's wetlands and watersheds all by ourselves, either. **Just as dropping a pebble in a pond creates ripples that grow larger and reach far, your support ensures the same for WWA's efforts for wetland conservation.**

A frequent barrier in our work is local partner capacity, so WWA often works to build local expertise and increase public and private investments in local wetland conservation. In some cases, this means we're seeking and securing grants to support not just our own work, but also the collaborative work of our partners. **In the last year alone, your contributions helped us generate more than half a million dollars in new public and private investments in local wetland conservation work** in addition to the budget appropriation described above. A few recent examples your support has made possible:

- A **\$50,000 award from The Brico Fund** to increase tribal engagement in local hazard mitigation planning work; to promote wetland-focused climate adaptation strategies in collaboration with the Northern Institute

of Applied Climate Science (NIACS); and to help Ashland County implement climate informed wetland restoration projects. NIACS has committed \$25,000 in project match.

- A **\$25,000 award from the Catalyst Fund** to help hire a local coordinator for the Lake Superior Collaborative. The Lake Superior Collaborative coordinates protection and restoration efforts in Wisconsin's portion of the Lake Superior Basin. It includes governmental agencies (federal, state, tribal, and local), academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations (including WWA) that work in or near Wisconsin's Lake Superior Basin. WWA will pass these funds to UW-Extension, which will house the position and provide another \$25,000 in match for the first year.
- A **\$299,000 award from the US EPA** to the Village of Plover to support hydrologic engineering, landowner outreach, and restoration planning for the Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project. This award will also support the export of project methods and exploratory work to build similar partnerships in at least two other Central Wisconsin communities. The Village of Plover and Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers committed an additional \$100,000 in local match.

Thank you for making this critical project development and partner support possible—for generating these wonderful ripples. We—and our partners—are grateful.

Thanks to these funders & partners:



Thanks for another successful Wetland Science Conference!

Thank you to all who joined us at the 2020 Wetland Science Conference in Elkhart Lake, WI! Nearly 50 oral and poster presentations helped us all learn about the art of wetland storytelling, invasive species control, wetland restoration techniques, and more. Mark your calendars for next year's conference, taking place February 16-18, 2021, in Stevens Point, WI.



As part of our effort to foster the next generation of wetland scientists, we host a yearly student presentation competition. Here is one of this year's winners, Maggie O'Brien (left) with the competition's coordinator Lauren Leckwee (right) from Wisconsin Coastal Management Program.



We were excited to announce that the Lower Wisconsin Riverway will soon be designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance! We gathered all the landowners for a special celebration at the conference.



Thank you to all our sponsors and exhibitors who make the conference possible!



Welcome Gretchen Benjamin to the Board!

At February's annual membership meeting, members voted to re-elect three members of Wisconsin Wetlands Association's Board of Directors and brought on a new member, Gretchen Benjamin. Please join us in welcoming Gretchen!

Gretchen is the Large River Specialist for the Midwest Division of The Nature Conservancy. She focuses on restoring and protecting ecological conditions in the Mississippi River and other national rivers, primarily by working with the US Army Corps of Engineers. Prior to joining the Conservancy, Gretchen spent nearly 25 years serving as a field biologist, river planner, and Mississippi River Basin Supervisor for WDNR. In her 36+ year career, she has worked on restoration and policy for almost 2,000 miles of the mainstream Mississippi River.





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Watch WWA on the big screen in Madison in April!

This fall, we learned that our video, “How Wetlands Manage Water,” was selected for the 2020 Wild & Scenic Film Festival and its touring show. Now we’re excited to announce that the film festival will be making a stop in Madison, WI, this spring!

Join us to watch the video on the big screen at the Barrymore Theater on April 10 at 7 pm. Tickets are available from barrymorelive.com and are \$15 (advanced) \$17 (day of).



Can't make it to Madison to watch the video in the theater? Enjoy it on the small screen at wisconsinwetlands.org/videos.

If your community is interested in hosting the Wild & Scenic Film Festival and WWA's video, contact the film festival at wildandscenicfilmfestival.org.



Thank your legislator for voting for wetlands!

As a Wisconsin Wetlands Association member, you know that wetlands are vital to solving a wide array of landscape and water problems. With the *unanimous* passage of SB 252 through both houses and AB 701/SB 631 through the Assembly, every Wisconsin legislator took at least one pro-wetland vote this session.

Help us reinforce this positive action for wetlands by thanking your legislators for supporting wetland conservation!

The following legislators took an **extra step** to support wetlands this session by authoring or cosponsoring at least one of the bills mentioned above. If you see your legislators listed here, please consider sending them a note to thank them for their proactive role for wetlands this session!

To find your legislators, enter your address in the upper right hand box at maps.legis.wisconsin.gov. You can also call the Legislative Hotline toll-free at (800) 362-9472. If in Madison, dial (608) 266-9960.

SB 252 (2019 Act 157) provides \$150,000 for wetland flood storage demonstration projects in Ashland County. These projects will show flood risk reduction techniques involving wetland, stream, and floodplain restoration. The proposal addresses needs identified through WWA's flood hazards work in the Lake Superior Basin.

AB 701/SB 631 simplifies the permitting process for hydrologic restoration projects and creates a council to advance hydrologic restoration priorities across the state. The proposal addresses needs WWA identified in collaboration with restoration partners.

State Representative Cosponsors and Authors

Anderson, Jimmy (D - Fitchburg)
Billings, Jill (D - LaCrosse)
Brostoff, Jonathan (D - Milwaukee)
Doyle, Steve (D - Onalaska)
Edming, James (R - Glen Flora)
Emerson, Jodi (D - Eau Claire)
Gruszynski, Staush (D - Green Bay)
Horlacher, Cody (R - Mukwonago)
Kerkman, Samantha (R - Salem)
Kitchens, Joel (R - Sturgeon Bay)
Krug, Scott (R - Nekoosa)
Kurtz, Tony (R - Wonewoc)
Loudenbeck, Amy (R - Clinton)
Milroy, Nick (D - South Range)

Mursau, Jeffrey (R - Crivitz)
***Meyers, Beth** (D - Bayfield)
(Author of AB266/SB252)
Neubauer, Greta (D - Racine)
Nygren, John (R - Marinette)
Ohnstad, Tod (D - Kenosha)
***Oldenburg, Loren** (R - Viroqua)
(Author of AB701/SB631)
Ott, Jim (R - Mequon)
Plumer, Jon (R - Lodi)
Quinn, Romaine (R - Barron)
Ramthun, Timothy (R - Campbellsport)
Rohrkaste, Mike (R - Neenah)
Skowronski, Ken (R - Franklin)
Sinicki, Christine (D - Milwaukee)

Spreitzer, Mark (D - Beloit)
***Steineke, Jim** (R - Kaukauna)
(Author of AB266/SB252 and AB701/SB631)
Stubbs, Shelia (D - Madison)
Stuck, Amanda (D - Appleton)
Thiesfeldt, Jeremy (R - Fond du Lac)
Tranel, Travis (R - Cuba City)
Tusler, Ron (R - Harrison)
VanderMeer, Nancy (R - Tomah)
Vining, Robyn (D - Wauwatosa)
Wichgers, Chuck (R - Muskego)

** indicates author*

State Senators continued on next page

For more information about these bills or WWA's legislative activities this session, please contact WWA's Policy Liaison Jennifer Western Hauser at Jennifer.WesternHauser@wisconsinwetlands.org.

State Senator Cosponsors and Authors

***Bewley, Janet** (D - Mason)
(Author of AB266/SB252 and AB701/SB631)

***Cowles, Robert** (R - Green Bay)
(Author of AB701/SB631)

Feyen, Dan (R - Fond du Lac)

Hansen, Dave (D - Green Bay)

Miller, Mark (D - Monona)

Olsen, Luther (R - Ripon)

***Petrowski, Jerry** (R - Marathon)
(Author of AB266/SB252)

Ringhand, Janis (D - Evansville)

Schachtner, Patty (D - Somerset)

Shilling, Jennifer (D - La Crosse)

Testin, Patrick (R - Stevens Point)

Wanggaard, Van (R - Racine)

Wirch, Robert (D - Somers)

** indicates author*



Newly enacted Act 157, which provides \$150,000 for wetland flood storage demonstration projects in Ashland County, passed both houses with unanimous support and was signed by Governor Evers on March 3, 2020.

For more information about these bills or WWA's legislative activities this session, please contact WWA's Policy Liaison Jennifer Western Hauser at Jennifer.WesternHauser@wisconsinwetlands.org.