

## **Constitutional Amendment Would Put Politics Back Into Conservation**

### **By Brandon Butler**

Jefferson City, Mo | February 17, 2014 - Right now, there is a proposed constitutional amendment working its way through the State Capitol that would completely change the way conservation is regulated in Missouri. If approved by voters, SJR42 (Senator Schmitt from Kirkwood) and HJR57 (Representative Barnes from Jefferson City) would create a permanent Joint Committee on Administrative Rules. Meaning, the General Assembly would govern conservation. Biologists should set squirrel seasons and fish limits, not politicians.

Missouri's current system of allowing the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) to govern is what makes Missouri one of the foremost conservation states in our country. The fact that we don't allow politics to override biological sense and public opinion ensures Missourians can trust MDC to act in the best interest of conservation with no influence from special interest groups. In fact, recent surveys in the *Missouri Conservationist* show that 9 out of 10 Missourians are interested in fish, forest and wildlife; 85% say they can trust MDC; and 73% say the Department is doing a good or excellent job. These are excellent approval ratings for our citizen-led Conservation Commission.

If SJR 42 or HJR57 were to pass, rules brought forth by MDC would have to pass through a General Assembly approval process. According to the language in the bill, "Any rule disapproved by majority vote of the committee shall be held in abeyance and not effective until the conclusion of certain legislative and judicial action." If the General Assembly could not agree on the opening day of deer season, instead of sitting on a hillside waiting on a buck you'll be at home waiting on politicians to decide when to allow you to go hunting. That's not what I want. Doubt you do either.

Many states have politically tied conservation departments, and one thing the employees of those state agencies have in common is the collective wish for the elimination of bureaucracy in the governing of conservation. As a former public affairs specialist for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, I know this from experience.

Currently, MDC is governed by the Conservation Commission, which is made up of four commissioners that serve statewide, serving both urban and rural Missouri. No more than two commissioners may be of the same political party. The checks and balances come with the appointment of volunteer citizens by the Governor and confirmation by the Missouri Senate. This process has worked for more than 75 years and serves as a successful track record. Our current conservation governing system is truly an apolitical, scientific-based agency. It must stay that way. Missouri does not need to go back to partisan-politic days. Missouri was there once, and legislative politics watched as our natural resources disappeared.

The citizen-led Conservation Commission is responsible for approving or disapproving all regulations promulgated by MDC. The rules passed by the Conservation Commission do not go to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules/General Assembly for final approval. In this sense, MDC is unique, as it has been since the 1936 constitutional amendment that created the Conservation Commission.

MDC is never going to please everyone. No organization of the masses can. However, MDC goes to great lengths to gather citizen input through public meetings, outreach efforts, workshops, online surveys, and research prior to proposing and setting rules.

I've said it so many times before, and I'm sure most of you reading this column agree, Missouri is an exceptionally blessed state when it comes to the natural resources we have here. The system we have in place for the governance of conservation isn't broken. On the contrary, it is the shining example in our nation of how conservation should be governed. We cannot allow SJR42 or HJR57 to pass. You must contact your elected officials and adamantly express your desire for leaving the Conservation Commission in charge of deciding what is right for Missourians.

See you down the trail...