

County board debates its influence on lynx discussion

Jane Howard

The University of Minnesota has asked the Cook County Board of Commissioners to write a letter supporting its application for a grant to fund a symposium on balancing environmental conservation with economic progress, but the board decided on Tuesday, June 9, 2009 to decline the request.

A one-day symposium entitled *Economics, Wildlife, and Climate Change in Northeastern Minnesota* has been proposed for October, to be followed by additional meetings with interested stakeholders. The symposium would use the listing of the Canadian lynx as a threatened species and its consequences to the economy of northeastern Minnesota as a case study, bringing together experts from the fields of biology, forestry, and economics with representatives of government, business, and conservation advocacy groups.

According to the grant application, "The way of life in northeastern Minnesota is profoundly influenced by natural resources.... Recreation and tourism provide an important foundation for the economy of northeastern Minnesota. ...Listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) triggers legal requirements for species conservation. One argument made against ESA is that it impedes economic progress."

The symposium would "consider ways to reduce negative impacts and even derive positive impacts from ESA listing and Critical Habitat designation," and "define common ground among stakeholders and identify practical and realistic solutions...."

A second phase following the symposium is expected to "help meet the goal of economic and environmental sustainability for northeastern Minnesota."

"...The proposed project is an example which brings biologists, ecologists, and social scientists together with policy-makers and the public, working towards a solution that has positive aspects for lynx, the environment, and North Shore communities."

Topics to be discussed would include the economic and societal values of tourism, climate change, ownership patterns in the Arrowhead region, anticipated changes in human population over the next 20-30 years, and expectations for the future of the forest products industry.

The grant application assumes that climate change over the next century will lead to the decline of wildlife species such as lynx, moose, the American marten, and the boreal chickadee in the southern edges of their ranges.

Commissioner Bob Fenwick expressed opposition to the grant application itself, saying he was against government money being spent on such a project. One problem he had with the symposium was the premise of climate change. "I don't think climate change has anything to do with it," he said.

"It's all based on unfounded information," said Commissioner Fritz Sobanja.

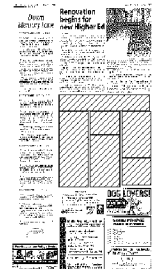
Commissioner Bruce Martinson noted that, while some are hoping the lynx critical habitat boundary will expand even further, it couldn't expand further in Cook County since it covers most of the county already. In addition, he said, some people want to change the lynx status from threatened to endangered.

Commissioner Jim Johnson said he supports being "part of the conversation," but Commissioner Fenwick indicated he believes the county has no voice in the discussion and is not really part of the conversation. "...We're not. Not anymore," he said.

Commissioner Sobanja said he would like to see grant money go toward septic systems, roads, and Public Health & Human Services needs instead.

The board decided not to send a letter supporting the grant application but agreed to try to send a representative if the symposium takes place, in order to keep an eye on what's happening and advocate for the county.

The grant writers, Dr. Ronald A. Moen,



Center for Water and Environment/
Natural Resources Research Institute
at the University of Minnesota Duluth;
Dr. Lee Frelich and Dr. Ingrid Schnieder
of the Department of Forest Resources;
and Dr. David Fulton of the Department
of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation
Biology, “believe this project has potential
for benefiting lynx, benefiting Minnesota,
and also at the broader scale bringing the
university into a strong position as a leader
in the interdisciplinary work on climate
change, species ranges, and consequences
to the economics of local communities.”