*Up*Front

As DNR director I fully appreciate the support of our constituents, both financially and otherwise. Without the strong backing of members of the public our agency would not meet its mission of conservation, protection, preservation and management of Illinois' natural resources, nor would we have the ability to create bold, new initiatives to protect landscapes, wildlife and connect people to nature.

As many of you might know, DNR has undergone a decade of budget cuts, program cutbacks and reduced staffing levels. The fact is, our agency has been reduced by half over the past decade. To demonstrate, take, for example, Illinois Beach State Park, which has more than 2 million visitors each year yet the staffing level has gone from 21 to eight in a decade. Many other state parks, conservation areas and natural areas have similar issues. Fewer staff means that maintenance of buildings, campgrounds and bathhouses, control of invasive species and other habitat improvement projects have been deferred. Often important programs have witnessed similar declines.

While the impacts to our operations and programs have been minimized because of the hard work and dedication of our natural resource professionals, many of the challenges we face today, and in the future, are going to be hard to contain.

To put this in dollars and cents, the general revenue tax portion of our budget has gone from nearly $107 million in 2002 to a mere $49 million in 2012. The number of staff to carry out our operations also has been drastically reduced. The agency's response has been to shift operational and staffing expenses to other state funds, as appropriate for their purpose. After a period of 10 years, the truth is that these other funds no longer have the flexibility or cash balance to be sustainable.

Under my directorship, the agency has taken a number of steps to cut costs and manage the tough fiscal situation the state finds itself in, while maintaining a focus on our core mission and values of conservation. This has not been easy. The steps DNR has taken to address the situation have provided an example for the rest of state government as we have led in budgeting, accountability, cost-cutting and procurement.

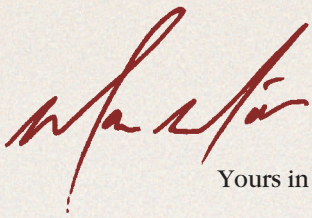
Because of this leadership, we are clearly in a position to justify additional revenues or funding from the General Assembly. Admittedly, competing pressures on the state budget, and the need to help those most vulnerable, make our strong conservation arguments tougher to sell when the whole picture is considered. Therefore, we need a new, sustainable approach.

It has always been my vision to pursue and achieve sustainable revenues for the agency and its mission. We want to make this a reality. Now is the time for constituents to act and to support the effort that will deliver DNR from this financial situation. As always, the mission of this organization is supported by its constituents, but we will need an active effort by supportive organizations and individuals to achieve this end.

We are facing this issue head-on today because ignoring the crisis will compound it annually. The quality of state facilities will continue to diminish if an investment is not made to return our public sites to an appropriate state of service, making it much more costly to address the problem in the future.

I have been discussing these issues with organizations and in public meetings to educate constituents about the details. There will be many public events in the future, as well as a Conservation Congress meeting, where you will be able to obtain detailed information.

Until then, thank you for your support and commitment to our agency.



Yours in conservation,
Marc Miller