http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisc-capitol-dome-s5.jpg

It can be difficult for legislators to know the full effect of cuts without the critical input of citizens. Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about how citizen input provided her with details about the effect of cuts in the DNR budget.

MADISON - “Why is it I keep hearing more about what’s in the governor’s budget?” the woman asked me. “Don’t you see it all at once and then decide what to do?”

It can be difficult for legislators to know the full effect of cuts without the critical input of citizens.

For example, news of cuts to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) made its way to western Wisconsin. Constituents communicated back to me the effect of these cuts. Through emails, phone calls and office visits I was able to piece together the real effect of a few lines of DNR budget cuts.

County conservation staff assists locals in protecting water resources and rehabilitating lost habitat. For example, last summer I was delighted to attend the “opening” of a rehabilitated trout stream in Buffalo County. While only Mother Nature can create a trout stream, a hard-working coalition of people made possible the restoration of habitat to bring spawning trout back to Buffalo County.

There are dozens of best practices farmers can use to protect waterways and keep nutrients where they belong – on the crops. Investing in the assistance farmers need to be good land and water stewards is an investment that will pay off for future generations.

One way to accomplish change in the quality of our waterways is to engage groups of farmers through a process known as farmer-led councils. This water quality enhancement process focuses energy of many community members in a transparent and democratic process. But to

be successful, projects need a dedicated coordinator. This role falls to UW Extension staff funded in part through a line in the DNR budget called nonpoint source contracts.

When I first saw this budget line, I imagined contracts to private industry. Only through emails, phone calls, office visits and more phone calls did I realize the full extent of the decision to eliminate these funds. Further, I began to understand the value of farmer-led watershed councils and the important role conservation and extension staff play in coordinating the work of many community groups and levels of government.

Residents of Dunn and Barron Counties are working hard to restore Lake Menomin and Tainter Lake. Restoration efforts are enhanced by the Red Cedar River Water Quality Partnership, made up of 14 different groups including businesses, Wisconsin Farmers Union, nonprofits and local residents through their lake association. But without the coordination of UW extension staff, the partnership would not be effective.

I received a letter and office visits from Dunn County Board Chair Steve Rasmussen who told me about the work to “mitigate the pollution of the watershed and algae blooms” in the lakes.

Chair Rasmussen wrote, “Elimination of these two positions would be a major setback in a multi-county/multi-municipality effort to improve the health of the Red Cedar River Watershed…The health of the Red Cedar River is of critical importance to the citizens of Dunn County.”

Later I spoke with Mr. Rasmussen who told me 68% of all pollution in the Red Cedar came from agriculture. Farmer-led initiatives were an effective way to address nonpoint source pollution. Farmers talk with each other. They learn from each other. Sometimes folks will more readily accept new practices if they see their neighbors doing it.

Cutting conservation and extension staff comes at a critical time for the Red Cedar and watersheds across the state. I spoke to a man with intimate knowledge of land and water conservation, Jim VandenBrook, the executive director of Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association. He said “The facts are clear: water quality has progressively gotten worse since the 1990s; Great Lakes Initiative money is disappearing; DNR does not have the staff to do education. We are the educators for DNR.”

In our discussion about the work of the conservation and extension staff Jim noted the watershed partners “are all worried all our work is going by the wayside.”

Indeed. The partners know why we work so hard to protect land and water.

Thank you to all who wrote or called. Your input is critical for Wisconsin’s future. In the words of the ancient proverb, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children”.