

Tax reform needs to include funding for natural resources by Karen Heidman

In 2010, Iowa voters approved by a 63% margin an amendment to the State Constitution, creating the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund (also called I-WILL). A portion of any increase in the base state sales tax would be allocated to water quality, conservation and outdoor recreation. But no sales tax increase in the last 12 years has made it possible to fund the trust. The coffer is empty.

Meanwhile, a decade-long funding shortage has resulted in 750 impaired water bodies, the slashing of our park ranger force by 40%, the hobbling of maintenance and daily upkeep of our 83 state parks, and the closure of some beaches due to unsafe levels of pollutants and bacteria.

In 2010, voters sent a clear message that they wanted to pass untainted resources to future generations, they wanted their grandchildren to enjoy the bounty of Iowa's natural beauty, and they were willing to spend what was necessary to do that despite the slog through an ongoing recession. They still do.

Yet, the bounty in question has come in the form of tax giveaways to corporations and wealthy individuals — some of whom don't live in Iowa. The Iowa Chamber Alliance praised Iowa's largest tax cut ever as "moving the needle on competitiveness."

However, Iowa cannot attract more families to the state with just a favorable tax environment. They also demand a healthy environment for living and recreation.

Obviously, a balance must be achieved. A record \$1.2 billion budget surplus demands some creative bipartisan thinking about how to finally fund a gift Iowa voters dedicated to themselves and their posterity over a decade ago.

Please urge the governor and your legislators to include the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund with its original allocations in any tax reform plan.