



WISCONSIN WILDLIFE FEDERATION NEWS

Contact: Executive Director George Meyer 608-516-5545

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Wildlife Federation Hires Mark LaBarbera

WWF Executive Director George Meyer announced that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation has hired Mark LaBarbera to replace him when Meyer retires in July.

Federation President Craig Challoner of Omro led the executive search team in a process that began about a year ago when Meyer began planning his retirement after 18 years of building WWF into the largest conservation organization in Wisconsin, with approximately 200 affiliated hunting, fishing and trapping clubs and outdoor-related businesses across the state. Its expansive grassroots network of outdoor enthusiasts is key to the Federation's ongoing success in fulfilling its mission of supporting conservation education and the advancement of scientifically based professional management of natural resources.

"George, a former DNR Secretary, built the Federation into a large and strong voice for conservation in Wisconsin. His knowledge and advocacy skills raised the visibility and strength of the organization to be a formidable voice for sportsmen and women in the state", according to Challoner. "Also, George fully understood the importance of youth conservation education and the importance of building the next generation of conservation leaders as shown by the Federation's creation of the Wisconsin Conservation Leadership Corps under his tenure."

"Following George Meyer as Executive Director and having his mentorship through these next few months of transition, and hopefully beyond, is a rare opportunity," said LaBarbera, a lifelong hunter, angler and conservationist who was born and raised in West Allis and graduated from UW-Milwaukee. "George is already in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame and has a depth of knowledge and experience like no one else I know."

"The Federation's search committee and Board of Directors realized early on that the next Executive Director would have big shoes to fill," said President Challoner. "We were flooded with applications from a number of states and strong candidates. After narrowing the selection, we brought in seven candidates for interviews, and then narrowed the field to three finalists for a second round of interviews. When Mark accepted our offer, we were confident that we had found someone who could add to our success."

LaBarbera will work from his home in Hazel Green, Wisconsin, where he lives with his wife, Coni, their Black Lab Sadie, goats and chickens. Like Meyer, he will visit WWF affiliates, partners and conservation stakeholders throughout the state to see and hear first-hand their issues, concerns and successes.

LaBarbera has a long resume in the private and public sector, including dual role as head of Information & Education and Director of Communications for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. He currently partners with Dan Small on TV, radio and online video programs, and is self-employed as Mark LaBarbera & Associates, Inc.

"People were surprised to learn that my first outdoor job after college was with a company in the historic Grain Exchange Building on Michigan Avenue in Milwaukee which also was home to National Wildlife and International Wildlife magazines before they moved to the East Coast," LaBarbera said.

The incoming Executive Director also spent 19 years helping to build the North American Hunting Club, and launch the North American Fishing Club, Handyman Club of America and other membership groups for gardening, golf and other outdoor recreation activities. When he left in the late '90s, they had more than a million members cumulatively, plus magazine, video and television production, book publishing and related businesses. He also served as President of the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Alliance.

At various times during his long tenure there, he worked on fish, wildlife, lands and waters issues as well as recruitment, reactivation and retention initiatives while serving on the Boards of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation, National Shooting Sports Foundation, Wildlife Forever, Tread Lightly, American Sportfishing Association and other outdoor industry and nonprofit organizations. He is former Board Chair and President of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers.

He was a 2002 Finalist for the prestigious national Budweiser Outdoorsman of the Year conservation award. A sample of his other honors and awards include serving as a Federal Duck Stamp Judge and receiving the 1999-2000 "Teddy Award" for Best Conservation Program as Executive Producer of "America's Outdoor Heritage." WWF gave him its 2020 Conservation Communicator of the Year Award. Pheasants Forever awarded him its 2019 Conservationist of the Year Award and National Wild Turkey Federation honored him with 2018 Communicator of the Year. Wisconsin Society of Science Teachers recognized LaBarbera with the 2016 Friend of Science Education Award.

After leaving the North American Outdoor Group job, LaBarbera worked independently with clients like BOAT US, B.A.S.S., National Shooting Sports Foundation, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance, Mule Deer Foundation and others. He also launched the Outdoor Heritage Education Center nonprofit group and continued to serve as its lead volunteer organizing the big Midwest Outdoor Heritage Education Expo at the Wisconsin DNR's MacKenzie Center as well as OHEC's other programs that connect people and resources. Wisconsin Conservation Congress named OHEC its 2018 Statewide Conservation Organization of the Year. He is wrapping up a Great Lakes Invasives project launching this spring which includes a Touch of the Wild mobile education trailer and reprinting and distributing "Invaders of the Great Lakes" pocket guide books.

"We recognize Mark's ability to work well with stakeholder groups as diverse as Dane County Conservation League, Madison Audubon and Federation of Great Lakes Sportsmen's Clubs as well as Safari Club International, Izaak Walton League of America and Friends of NRA," said Meyer. "Mark will be an outstanding Executive Director for the Federation and will carry it to new heights in conservation in Wisconsin. He is an excellent choice of the Federation's Board of Directors."

LaBarbera is current Board Chairman of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, a Lafayette County Delegate to the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, Co-Chair of Hunting Works for Wisconsin, and a WWF District 10 Director. He represents bird hunters on the Wisconsin Sporting Heritage Council.

According to WWF's First Vice President Pat Quaintance of Bayfield, part of the search team, "We appreciate Mark's vision and work ethic. He wrote the Strategic Plan for the Youth Conservation Congress and also contributed to the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. And the DNR asked him to sit in on interview panels in Rhinelander when they were hiring wildlife biologists, and in Madison when they interviewed the YCC Coordinator."

WWF Treasurer Dave Verhage of Plover added, "I'm reassured of Mark's fiscal skills because of his service for multiple terms as Treasurer of the Natural Resources Foundation and his prior fiscal oversight in several private and public organizations."

The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation is a 501 c 3 conservation organization comprised of over 200 sporting groups in Wisconsin and is dedicated to conservation education and advocating for sound conservation policy advocacy.

For information about WWF individual or organization membership, sponsorship and partnership in support of its conservation and education mission, contact georgemeyer@tds.net or visit www.wiwf.org.

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