

To: LWVUS Advocacy Committee Chair Chris Carson, carsonlwv@yahoo.com

From: League of Women Voters Lake Michigan Region -- Board of Directors

RE: We urge you to make Water Issues a Legislative Priority this session

Date: December 14 2014

The Board of Directors of LWV Lake Michigan Region, a four-state ILO with 49 member leagues, requests that LWVUS make Sustainable Water Resources a legislative priority.

Water has long been a focus of LWV work, starting with a 1920s study of flood control, erosion, and the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The League has addressed issues at the federal level that include industrial pollution, land use, agricultural policies, drinking water accessibility, acid rain, coastal management, and wetlands protection. All of these are important. Water impacts of Climate Change have now also become critical and often create a link for voters from climate as an abstract issue to either flooding or scarcity in their homes and businesses.

Water is both intimate and shared. It is often regional and does not adhere to political boundaries: Google “water as a bipartisan issue” for multiple current examples. Because it is local as well as federal, and because it is nonpartisan, water makes a great issue area for the league to enable activism and growth of our organization. Like the league, each community is different and has different water challenges. Promoting sustainable water resources makes LWV units more visible and influential in our communities, which should be a strategic goal overall. But we need support from our national office because many of the specifics, especially for large water bodies and overarching policy issues, are federally determined. A legislative priority for sustainable water resources would lend support to great work that is already being done in the field. Additionally, advocating for water issues would position us at the national level so that we are not solely on the defensive with regard to our program priorities – which is difficult and costly as acknowledged in the Leaders Update of December 4 where you requested this input.

Water is a key aspect of many national discussions in which the League is already involved. In energy, this is obvious with regard to fracking, toxic water pollution from coal plants, and pipeline safety concerns. The LWVUS Climate Change Task Force also has noted that water processing poses enormous demands on local governments ... “for most municipalities, their biggest use of electricity is associated with treating and distributing drinking water and then collecting, treating, and disposing of it after it has been used.” Investment in water management is expected to have a \$524 billion impact on the national economy in the next decade, according to a report from Water Research Foundation released in September 2014 (<http://www.waterrf.org/Pages/Projects.aspx?PID=4566>).

Water is also inseparable from Food and Agriculture issues in the study and position adopted by LWVUS at our last Biennial Convention. Pesticide and antibiotic run-off, dead zones from nutrients in our waterbodies, and groundwater reduction and contamination are some examples here.

Successful water resource management requires regulatory vigilance and monitoring, sound infrastructure planning, and fairness in availability and costing as a basic human right. All of these are areas where citizen engagement activities of League members provide leverage for meaningful impact. Local and state leagues already know this, and there is much activism happening in the LWV for sustainable water resources right now. There is activism and there is interest. When our ILO has caucuses at Convention, league leaders from across the country always come out to talk about water. In the Midwest, our ILO has a 47-year history working on Lake Michigan issues where we have been able to do outreach to diverse communities through our efforts. There is also an active Lake Erie Basin Committee, organized as a multi-league group in 1963, which covers 32 leagues. And it is thrilling to see a new 5-state ILO in the works to address issues relating to the Upper Mississippi.

We need the national organization to promote water as a legislative priority because so many of us are working on water protection and management at the regional, state and local level already. A national advocacy focus will help us be more effective in our current work, and will benefit the League as a whole because of the many opportunities to further engage our base and to attract new members.

With regard to outside resources, in our efforts in the Great Lakes region show that other established water activists welcome League involvement enthusiastically, as we are a “nontraditional ally” in their view. We are voting activists who have local connections and we further constituent engagement. Environmental groups and funders seek these attributes and will so even more following the dismal turnout of the 2014 elections. Our specific niche as advocates for democratic action is an asset that can be highlighted in the search for partners and funds. Our history and effectiveness working on water issues at all levels gives us credibility and power.

LWVLMR has secured grants to work on water issues, and that these grants are directly in line with the core mission and work of the LWV. We see increases in funding for stormwater and other climate-related water issues because there is sad recognition among foundations and businesses now that adaptation to our changing climate has become just as important as fighting to mitigate its effects. There is no doubt that sustainable water resource management will be on the minds of investors and activists in the coming year and on into the foreseeable future. By stepping up, LWVUS has the opportunity to be at the forefront of these discussions.

We have considered your filters carefully and we strongly support what are called the “core issues” in the Leaders Update. We ask that you add water to the list because it clearly is also a core issue in terms of current grassroots action, strategic value, and the public interest overall. Let’s continue with the historic leadership that the League has provided on sustainable water resources that matter to the public and to the future of our environment.

Respectfully submitted,

Henrietta Saunders, President
LWV Lake Michigan Region