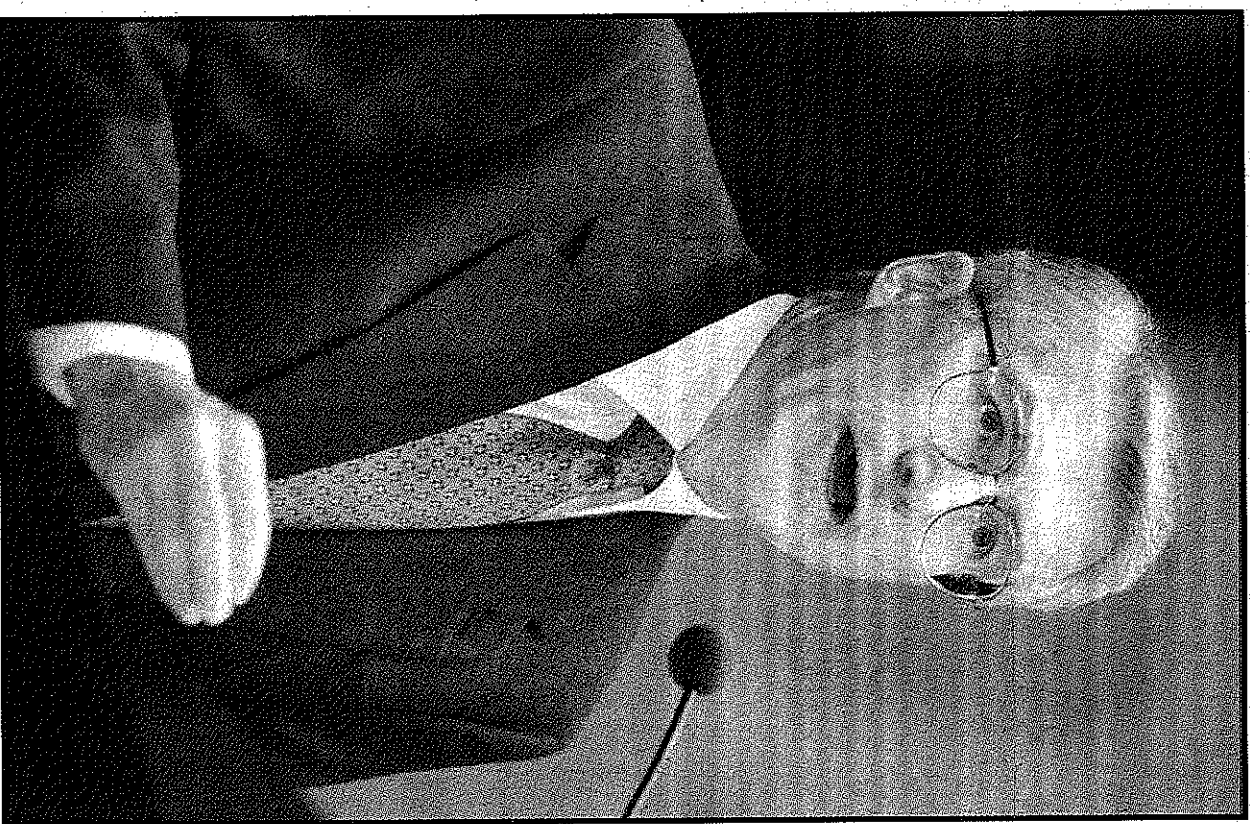


Conservation is Edgar's legacy

Journal staff and wire reports

SPRINGFIELD — Much will be written during the coming months about Gov. Jim Edgar's legacy. But for his efforts here, across the Journal area, Edgar is already being referred to as "Illinois Conservation Governor."

During his eight-year run, Edgar has played a key role in creating the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie near Wilmington and earmarking ecosystem funds for the Conservation 2000 program. Together with conservation director Brent Manning, Edgar created Conservation Congress to pro-



When he leaves office in January, Gov. Jim Edgar will leave behind a legacy of conservation that has added over 36,000 acres of public recreational land and natural areas and has begun work to improve and protect existing resources.

vide a statewide forum on environmental and recreational issues.

Nationally, the Republican Party's image among conservationists has been saddled with the baggage of former Interior Secretary James Watt, who many believe tried to put the national parks up for sale during the Reagan Administration. But the best-known presidential conservationist was also a Republican, Teddy Roosevelt, who created the parks service and proudly showed off his love of the outdoors.

Edgar, an avid bicyclist and horseman whose retreat from the pressures of office has been his log home outside of Springfield, has sculpted his policies more from the latter mold than the former.

"I don't think anybody has a better conservation record than Jim Edgar," says Al Grosboll, the governor's senior adviser on education and environment. "I think Jim Edgar has set a conservation standard by which future governors will be judged."

One might expect that kind of praise from a top aide. But Grosboll's sentiments are echoed by some who are often found on the other side of the river from government officials when it comes to protection of natural areas.

"I hope whoever comes in next will look at the Edgar record and try to continue the good work," says Claudia Emken, director of government and community relations for the Illinois branch of the Nature Conservancy.

Why such talk? Let's examine the record.

Since Edgar took office, the state has:

- Created the Department of Natural Resources, merging the former departments of Conservation, Energy and Natural Resources, and Mines and Minerals to encourage a coordinated effort toward land management.
- Worked with federal officials and conservationists to preserve 19,000 acres for open space and recreation at the Joliet Army Arsenal in Will County and 10,000 acres at the Savanna Depot in Carroll County.
- Dedicated more than 1,000 acres in Vermilion County near Danville for the Babe Woodward Natural Area.
- Dramatically increased the number of hiking and biking trails throughout the state.
- Created the Illinois River Initiative, which provides financial incentives for farmers and landowners to reduce sedimentation and restore natural areas.
- Established Conservation 2000, a project that devotes \$100 million over six years to protect natural resources. It employs partnerships with landowners to keep development and agriculture from encroaching on or harming sensitive waterways and land areas.
- Acquired 15,500 acres at Site M in Cass County, which is dedicated for hiking, hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation, as well as wildlife habitat.
- Established natural land along Redwing Slough in Lake County, "a very special resource that we wanted to preserve because development was going in around it," says Carol Knowles, a DNR spokeswoman.
- Worked with the Nature Conservancy and Cook County officials to establish the Wolf Road Prairie natural area. Covering the site of a failed subdivision, it preserves prairie grass and encompasses trails along side-walks built before the development fell on hard times during the Depression.
- Negotiated with coal companies to buy or lease 2,200 acres along the Kaskaskia River in southwest Illinois and 7,000 acres in Jackson and Perry counties.
- Purchased 1,186 acres from Commonwealth Edison to nearly double the size of Sangchris Lake State Park in Christian County.
- Protected swamp wildlife habitat along the Cache River in southern Illinois.

And the list goes on.

"Gov. Edgar has done more for conservation in Illinois than anyone I know," said J.R. Black who heads the local Kankakee River Basin Partnership, has served as a delegate to all three Conservation Congresses and was part of Edgar's Land and Water Task Force.

For example, the Journal area recently won nearly \$2.2 million in C2000 grants for local projects.

The Kankakee partnership won \$997,690 for 10 projects in Kankakee and Iroquois counties which include land acquisition, log jam removal, erosion control and survey work. The lion's share of that funding — \$595,350 — is earmarked for projects planned by the Kankakee River Conservancy District in Mokena.

At Midewin, the Prairie Parklands Partnership won \$415,500 for five projects. Other regional groups funded include The Chicago Wilderness, with \$38,974 going to work in Kankakee, Will, Cook, DuPage, Kane and Henry counties; the Headwaters Partnership for five projects in Champaign County and the Mackinaw River Partnership which includes \$10,747 for restoration work at Sibley Grove.

"The Edgar Administration has been very public-involvement-oriented and has always listened to constituents," says the Nature Conservancy's Emken. Grosboll agrees.

"Before Gov. Edgar, there were fears that government was acting too fast to condemn land for conservation purposes," he says. Because the governor "has felt very strongly that we don't want to turn off the private sector ... by and large, acquisitions have been voluntary relationships."

Much of the credit belongs to Manning, a past director of field operations for Ducks Unlimited whom Edgar chose from the very start as his point man at the former Conservation Department and now the DNR.

Understanding that any executive lives and dies by the people he hires, "Edgar made it clear to us that he wanted a professional in that job," says Grosboll, who was on the search committee.

That decision has proven profitable. During Edgar and Manning's tenure, the state has added more than 36,000 acres of outdoor recreation and natural areas and has begun numerous initiatives to improve and protect existing resources.

When former Gov. Jim Thompson retired from office, he left behind a treasure chest of newly acquired art and architecture. Edgar's trail may well be marked by park lands and wildlife habitat.