

Capitol Rally

puts a face on the issues

Article by Jim Lundstrom



The state Capitol in Madison was buzzing with visitors, lobbyists, legislators and their guests on April 13th as the Wisconsin Legislature wrestled with a blizzard of bills in the final days of the spring legislative session.

Some of the visitors were there to see their government in action, but one group was on a mission to be seen and heard by the legislators about several forest industry bills on their plates.

GLTPA members sporting black-billed, blaze orange caps stood out in the crowded Capitol corridors as they visited legislators' offices and urged them to support the forest industry bills on their agendas.

The event was promoted as a truck rally – it said so right across the front of the orange caps – but as a truck rally it paled in comparison to the giant rally of 2005 when 120 logging industry trucks showed their solidarity by circling Capitol square.

Times have changed drastically in those five years.

"It's hard for people to justify a trip from the Northwoods to Madison in this economy," said GLTPA executive director Henry Schienebeck.

About 30 GLTPA members and loggers showed up at the Capitol, but only six logging trucks made the trek, so it was decided to concentrate efforts indoors by meeting as many legislators as possible to spread the word about the bills and put a face on the forest industry before the legislators went into session at 11 a.m.

The last-minute lobbying effort went like clockwork, thanks to Capitol-savvy lobbyist Tony Langenohl, senior associate with Capitol Consultants, Inc., the lobbying organization hired by the GLTPA board of directors about a year ago to help the organization maneuver the corridors of power in the Capitol.

At stake were three bills, including a joint Senate and Assembly bill the GLTPA declared the No. 1 priority of the legislative session. Assembly Bill 778 (Senate Bill 562) allows haulers of "raw forest products" trucks with six axles and the requisite extra braking to haul a maximum of 98,000 pounds year round on Class A state highways.

As Schienebeck explained to the Assembly Forestry Committee earlier in the year in preparation for the bill's consideration, everyone wins with the bill because a larger load decreases the number of trips that have to be made.

"To keep one of the few industries in Wisconsin that has economic opportunities to expand in biomass, biofuels and other areas, it is imperative we are as efficient as possible in all areas, especially in transportation," Schienebeck told the committee. "AB 778 will add efficiency to transportation with no additional costs to the taxpayers for road maintenance and repair. It will add safety by decreasing the number of truck miles traveled. And it will most certainly reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions for cleaner air."

This was the third Capitol rally attended by Don Compton of DC Express Truck, Mason, Wis., and Tim Bay of Tim Bay Trucking, Glidden, Wis., including the massive 2005 truck rally.

"That was very impressive," Bay said. "We had 120 or so trucks. Police escorted us in and blocked all of the roads off."

On this rally, the two truckers were impressed by how well versed the legislators were on the issues and by the support the lawmakers were showing for the industry.

"Good support," Compton said. "Everyone's been very knowledgeable about the issues and saying they're going to pass."

In addition to meet-and-greets with key legislators that morning, a meeting was also set up between the loggers and Gov. Jim Doyle in the elegant Governor's conference room. Modeled after the Doge's Palace in Venice, the room features 26 allegorical and historical paintings and a shiny floor of Wisconsin hardwood.

GLTPA President Max Ericson presented Gov. Doyle – who is in his last year in office – with a plaque commemorating his support of the forest industry since taking office in 2003.

Doyle, in turn, thanked the GLTPA leadership for keeping logging issues on the table and promoting the industry, an industry, he said, that is already an economic powerhouse within the state and only has a brighter future with possible new Asian markets and biomass opportunities.

"The forest got us this far in Wisconsin," he said. "That's what made this state really special."

Not every group that shows up at the state Capitol gets the attention of the governor, a fact not lost on the GLTPA leadership.

"We try to make the best use of our members' time when they do come down," Schienebeck said from the Capitol again on May 5 as AB 778 was about to be signed. "Having it set up the way it was, it doesn't get any better than that. You make the rounds in the Capitol, and that night it's passed in both houses and here we are a few weeks later getting it signed into law. That's pretty impressive."

He attributes that efficiency to hired gun Langenohl.

"Having that access is having a strong lobbyist organization to work with," Schienebeck said. "Tony Langenohl and his company have done a phenomenal job bringing the association forward, knowing the ropes and how we need to operate better. The board of directors made a great decision to make that move."

The proof of that is evident in the just-ended legislative.

"Overall, I think we had a really successful legislative session," Schienebeck said. "Our truck weight bill went through, from what I understand, unanimously in committee, and a voice vote in both houses. I think that says a lot."

With a successful legislative system under GLTPA's collective belt, it's now time to prepare for the fall session.

"We'll have a priority meeting coming up pretty quickly," Schienebeck said. "We'll bring the Legislative and Transportation committees back together and say, what do you think our priorities need to be and what do we want to accomplish? Then we'll go to the board with our priorities and come up with a position paper and get working." ▲