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Cauthorn Questions Conservation Department Plane Purchase, Calls for Greater Accountability

Million Dollar Plane Purchase Shows Department's Waste of Tax Dollars

JEFFERSON CITY, MO – Senator John Cauthorn, R-Mexico, will once again sponsor legislation calling for the Conservation Department's one-eighth cent sales tax to be placed on the ballot once every 10 years. The call for greater accountability comes on the heels of the Conservation Department's plan to purchase a \$1.7 – 2 million luxury plane.

“First, why does the Conservation Department even need a plane? Second, why do they need leather seats and an intercom system for a 10-passenger plane?” said Cauthorn. “The lack of accountability allows this renegade department to waste our tax dollars - and Missourians should have a vote every 10 years as to whether they think their money is being spent wisely or not.”

Currently the department owns one plane and shares ownership of a second plane with the Missouri Department of Transportation. The Conservation Department is selling both planes to pay for a new plane with an “executive interior.” Reports indicate the Conservation Department is seeking to buy a new plane because “lower maintenance costs and longer life would save money.” The final cost of the plane would be approximately \$500,000.

“If spending \$500,000 is a cost-saving move, then what they originally were going to spend is even more ridiculous,” said Cauthorn. “With record high gas prices, I’m looking at trading in my truck for a more fuel-efficient vehicle, and many Missourians are taking similar actions. Meanwhile, the Conservation Department is on a shopping spree to upgrade their fleet with leather trim on our dime. Will they be serving champagne during flights as well?”

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Cauthorn has sponsored legislation in the past requiring that the one-eight cent sales tax, which funds the Department, be placed on the ballot every 10 years. Once and only voted on in 1976, the sales tax currently provides the department \$93.5 million in funding, over 60 percent of their budget. While state departments are looking at ways to trim budgets to live within taxpayers' means, the department is sitting on a \$36 million balance waiting to be spent. Every state agency except the Conservation Department is subject to appropriations and has to justify budgets annually.

"This last time Missourians have voted on this tax Jimmy Carter was a southern governor," said Cauthorn. "If they are the model program in the nation as they insist, then one public vote every 10 years isn't too much to ask for to provide some sense of accountability. Our hunting and fishing programs will prosper without this tax."

Cauthorn's proposal will begin to restore accountability to the department and force them to address taxpayer concerns. Among some of the fleecing of Missouri's tax dollars is:

- Overpopulation of deer, causing auto accidents and crop damage. Farmers are responsible for when their herd breaks free and causes damage. The Department is currently not held responsible for deer overpopulation.
- Numerous programs to which few people attend
 - Paid \$4,000 for concert pianist to perform in Kansas City for a small crowd
- Department purchase of land beyond organization's original goals
 - Original goal was to buy 300,000 acres of land. In 2004 had bought 450,000 acres of land.
 - Original goal to add five conservation areas within 50 miles of urban centers. In 2004 had 22 areas totaling 68,000 acres.
 - Purchased two acres of land in Cedar County costing \$70,560 total
- State Auditor reported excessive spending, including:
 - Over \$900,000 for catering and food service providers in 1999-2002
 - Incurred \$1,100 in late charges on credit cards in 1999 and 2000
 - Expensive costs for employees attending conferences (i.e. eight day St. Louis conference totaling \$30,000 for some employees)
 - 1,300 on-road vehicles with no cost reports or usage logs for vehicles PLUS owned three planes and one helicopter in 1999

Additionally, a loss of funding will not eliminate the department. Federal regulation ensures hunting and fishing license fees will not be used for purposes other than a state fish and wildlife agency

Sen. Cauthorn represents Missouri's 18th Senate District. He can be reached at his capitol office at (573) 751-6850. You can also visit his web page by going to www.senate.mo.gov/cauthorn.