

NEWS RELEASE

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Wisconsin's Environmental Decade Institute Announces New Environmental Law Office

(Madison, WI, September 1, 1999) –

September 1999 marked the birth of a new public interest environmental law center in Wisconsin to assist communities lacking the resources to protect their health and the environment.

Wisconsin's Environmental Decade Institute, a statewide environmental group, announced the creation of Midwest Environmental Advocates (MEA). MEA is the first environmental law center in this state.

The founder and legal director of MEA is attorney, Melissa K. Scanlan. Scanlan began two fellowships on September 1, 1999 that have enabled her to open this center. She said MEA will "provide legal and technical assistance to community groups across the Western Great Lakes region that are working for environmental justice." In addition to legal representation provided directly by MEA, the center also operates as a clearinghouse to connect community groups to pro bono and low cost legal services provided by attorneys who have joined MEA's *Advocacy Network*.

The *mission* of Midwest Environmental Advocates is to provide high quality legal services that support a multicultural, grassroots social movement; build local leadership; and implement innovative solutions to environmental problems.

Wisconsin's Environmental Decade Institute is serving as the fiscal sponsor of this new venture. The Decade Institute, in alliance with the National Association for Public Interest Law (NAPIL) and a foundation called "echoing green" announced in September that Ms. Scanlan was selected to receive two prestigious fellowships, the NAPIL Equal Justice Fellowship and the echoing green fellowship, to fund the center.

"We are very excited to be supporting the formation of Midwest Environmental Advocates," said Keith Reopelle, Co-Director of Wisconsin's Environmental Decade. "Contrary to the myth perpetrated by industry that there is a powerful environmental lobby, until now the Wisconsin environmental community has not had a single full time environmental attorney," he said. "There is a great need in this region for affordable legal support on public interest environmental issues. We hope this center will help put a dent in that need," Reopelle said.

Scanlan cautioned that the center is not to be construed as a replacement for the Public Intervenor Office, abolished by the Governor in 1995. "Wisconsin's citizens are entitled to their own state-funded advocate for public rights in the environment, and this center won't perform that unique function," Scanlan said.

Scanlan said her fellowships will allow her to establish a legal center to protect and promote the basic human right to a clean and healthy environment. "My goal is to use the law to build the power of the grassroots environmental movement in this region and to bridge groups that otherwise would not work together. This center is born out of the need to bring together diverse groups to build on each other's strengths and protect the natural resources on which we all depend," said Scanlan.

"I want to use my fellowships as a catalyst to build a legal center with a long term commitment to this region."

For more information about Midwest Environmental Advocates, call the Madison office at 608-251-5047.

About the Organizations

Scanlan has been an environmental advocate for a decade. She earned a Master of Science in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, and a law degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and is returning to her home state of Wisconsin to serve as a resource for community-based groups. While a graduate student, she worked in a variety of organizations, including San Francisco's Natural Resources Defense Council, Wisconsin's Department of Justice, and Foley & Lardner.

Wisconsin's Environmental Decade Institute, the fiscal sponsor of MEA, is a membership-based advocacy organization focusing on environmental issues that impact the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins. Based in Madison since 1971, WED has been the leading organization pushing for some of the most progressive environmental laws in the nation. These include Wisconsin's Environmental Protection Act, Groundwater Protection Act, Acid Rain Law, Power Plant Siting Law, State Recycling Law, and most recently the Sulfide Mining Moratorium Law.

NAPIL is the premiere U.S. organization dedicated to training and developing the next generation of lawyers to provide legal assistance for low-income and other underserved people. Founded in 1986 by law students on 15 campuses, NAPIL today is a national coalition of more than 150 law student chapters. NAPIL is committed to the principle that all Americans should have equal access to the justice system. To work toward equal justice, NAPIL focuses on two key areas: organizing, training and supporting public service-minded law students; and creating summer and postgraduate public interest jobs. A 1997 challenge grant from financier/philanthropist George Soros'

Open Society Institute enabled NAPIL – with matching support from more than 100 sponsoring law firms and corporations – to convert its Fellowships for Equal Justice program into the largest postgraduate legal fellowship program in the nation. By September 1999, the program will have 140 fellows in communities across the country.

echoing green, a New York City-based foundation, funds social entrepreneurs, people who are change makers for the social good. Each year they fund 25 new fellows to work nationally and internationally on a variety of projects, from bringing photography to inner-city children in Oakland, California, to protecting indigenous rights in Hawaii. Ms. Scanlan is the first person to receive funding for a Wisconsin-based project.