

ENVIRONMENT

Resignations fault state for failing to protect natural resources

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July 20, 2026, 5:12 a.m. ET

Key Points

Four members of the state's Natural Resource Commission, a body that oversees regulation inside the Department of Natural Resources, recently resigned.

The former commissioners expressed concern about the trajectory of the department's rulemaking process, which they say is degrading public trust.

In their letters and interviews with IndyStar, the commissioners detailed a behind the scenes look into how Indiana's natural resource regulatory process is changing under the current administration.

The first resignation letter came into [Gov. Mike Braun](#)'s inbox on June 12. In the next few weeks, three more followed. By the end of the month, a full third of the state's 12-member commission dedicated to drafting rules around Indiana's natural resources had formally stepped down.

In their letters and interviews with IndyStar, the former members of the [Natural Resources Commission](#) detailed growing frustration with changes inside the [Department of Natural Resources](#), the state agency they are tasked with advising. One letter called out the department's growing disregard for public input while another accused the department of destroying public trust and pushing forward management decisions based on “whims and not science.”

Three of the four resigning NRC members expressed disappointment with current state leaders in their resignations.

The exodus began with Bart Herriman, who was followed in quick succession by Chairman Bryan Poynter and Jane Ann Stautz, who resigned June 23 and 24 respectively. Less than a week later, on June 30, Phil French filed his goodbye.

All four were long-serving members of the commission, which oversees part of the rulemaking process for various public trusts including the state's wildlife and mineral rights.

In his resignation letter to Braun, Poynter, who served for 21 years, wrote that he felt "the role of the commission is no longer valued by your administration..." In a July interview with the IndyStar, he added that leadership decisions are destroying the public's trust in the DNR. Similarly, French wrote: "Unfortunately, I no longer believe that public input plays the significant role it once did in the Commission's work." Herriman, who served for more than a decade, wrote that "unfortunately for the citizens of the State of Indiana and our natural resources, there has been a meaningful change in the way the DNR and NRC operate."

Stautz, who had served on the commission for more than 30 years, expressed gratitude in her measured resignation but said in an interview with IndyStar last week that she said she felt the NRC's role has been diminished in the Braun administration.

Braun's office did not respond to IndyStar's request for comment on the resignations, but instead sent a statement from the DNR. In the statement DNR officials disputed the idea that the commission and agency do not have a good working relationship.

These resignation letters "do not accurately reflect the collaboration among the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, the Natural Resources Commission, and the public to steward Indiana's natural resources responsibly and transparently through science-based decision making," a DNR spokesperson wrote.

It's not unheard of for NRC members to resign, though four NRC members leaving within such a short time frame is unusual.

A wholesale departure like this is not common, Rick Cockrum, a former commissioner, told IndyStar. Cockrum resigned from his post 20 years ago because he feared a business he was starting conflicted with his board service.

“There has always been change, and that’s healthy and you want diversity of thought,” Cockrum said, “but I’ve never seen something like this.”

NRC nearly shuttered by state lawmakers

The resignation sweep comes six months after a failed attempt from state legislators to do away with the NRC during the 2026 Indiana General Assembly.

State Rep. Steve Bartels, R-Eckerty, introduced House Bill 1003 that would have eliminated the commission altogether. His legislative push met fervent opposition from hunting and conservation groups across the state, who signed a letter supporting the existence of the NRC.

DNR leadership and staff remained neutral as the bill went through the legislative process.

In late March, at a regularly scheduled NRC meeting at Fort Benjamin Harrison State Park, Poynter closed the meeting with a pointed speech.

“It’s been a rough several months,” Poynter said. “Actions sometimes speak louder than words.”

DNR's silence in the legislature was disrespectful, Poynter said, as DNR Director Alan Morrison sat mutely by. DNR leadership's disregard for the commission eroded the relationship the two bodies had for decades before Morrison took the helm, Poynter said.

Instability at the NRC prompts objectivity concerns

The former commissioners noted the key role the NRC can play when the state moves to change regulations concerning natural resources – like bobcat hunting quotas, recreation rules or forestry management policies.

The commission, historically stocked with third-party expertise from citizen appointees, is supposed to consult with concerned Hoosiers and environmental groups, question the state and identify blind spots in proposed policy, Stautz said.

"We could, you know, ask the department and challenge the department appropriately, where necessary, on those rules and regulations, so that it wasn't just directly, you know, top down or driven by one, one viewpoint," Stautz said in a July interview with IndyStar.

This year, both Stautz and Poynter said in interviews with the IndyStar that they noticed that the rulemaking process looked a little different. French and Herriman could not be reached for comment.

Instead of consulting with the commission and invested citizens before moving forward with new regulations, Morrison began adopting preliminary rules without a commission hearing, Stautz and Poynter said.

Members of the commission can still share their opinions in public hearings, but the dynamic is different, Stautz said.

"The ability for the commission to have the influence and the authority has been compromised or has been reduced," Stautz said.

DNR bobcat rules highlight NRC challenges

The DNR's handling of bobcats provides a window into the change.

Trapping returns: [After 56 years, bobcat trapping returns to Indiana. Some fear it will hurt once endangered felines](#)

In 2025, the state opened a limited bobcat trapping season after several years of back and forth of data collection and input from outside scientists. This year the state wanted to nearly double the bobcat quota, allowing Hoosiers to harvest 400 bobcats during the season with weapons such as guns and bows and arrows in addition to trapping.

"There's no science behind it," Poynter said. "I can't tell you who wanted it or why they wanted it."

The proposed change in policy stems from the success of the 2025 bobcat trapping season, DNR spokeswoman Holly Lawson wrote in an email to IndyStar in response to questions regarding Poynter's concerns.

"In 2026, the goal of proposed updates is to responsibly manage Indiana's bobcat population and decrease negative interactions with bobcats across the 40 counties with high-quality bobcat habitat, while still maintaining a strong bobcat population in Indiana," she wrote.

Learn more: [Indiana looks to increase bobcat hunting opportunities in 2026](#)

With the recent resignations, questions remain how the NRC will operate in the future.

Braun has moved rapidly to fill the empty seats. In a July news release, he announced he was appointing John Wright, Tom Kelley, Heather Setser and Kevin Mahan to the commission.

The departure of the four commission members represents a combined loss of more than half a century of understanding the ins and outs of how the commission works, said Dan Boritt, executive director of Indiana Wildlife Federation, who led the charge to save the NRC.

"[The news of the resignations] breaks my heart," Boritt said. "They were doing this to do good by the public trust."

Read the resignation letters

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IndyStar's environmental reporting project is made possible through the generous support of the nonprofit Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.