

In his worldview, business had a duty to the environment

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Robert G. Dunn, a Minnesota small-business owner, conservationist and Republican legislator from Princeton in the 1960s and '70s, was an architect of landmark environmental legislation that won bipartisan support and national recognition. Dunn died March 15 at his Princeton home at age 94.

He was a friendly man, whose smile belied his imposing 6-foot-4, 220-pound stature. As a legislator, he was known for his calm, studied approach and was respected by Democrats and Republicans alike.

Dunn's son George, a St. Paul attorney, said it was fitting that his father was eulogized by former U.S. Sen. Dave Durenberger, a Republican, and Peter Gove, a retired businessman and Democrat who was the first executive director of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in the 1970s. Gove started as an environmental aide to the late Gov. Wendell Anderson.

"Of the 15-plus major environmental statutes passed in that landmark 1973 session, Sen. Bob Dunn co-authored most of them," Gove said at the funeral at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Princeton.

"When I remember those legislators who were the key allies of the Anderson administration on conservation and environmental legislation, Bob was always there for the good of his constituents, our state and our natural heritage."

Dunn also served DFL and GOP governors on environmental and waste-management boards after he retired from the Legislature in 1980. He always said being an environmental steward was a "conservative" act in the long-term interests of nature and the economy.

The former retail-lumber company owner was an authority on complex environmental issues. He spent 15 years, until retirement in 1995, on state commissions

that dealt with tough problems involving hazardous waste disposal, pipeline safety, nuclear waste disposal, timber cutting and others.

He loved walking the woods, and planted an estimated 20,000 tree seedlings with his children on family land on Caribou Lake in northeastern Minnesota.

In the 1980s, Dunn headed the former Minnesota Waste Management Board, charged with finding disposal sites. He was hung in effigy, demonized and featured on protest buttons in some parts of the state.

"It wasn't as much fun as it could have been," Dunn quipped in a 1995 Star Tribune article. "My whole motivation has been to do the right thing for environmental protection, and other motives were ascribed to me then."

Dunn grew up in Edina, the son of a doctor. His grandfather, also named Robert Dunn, owned the Princeton newspaper and was a Minnesota legislator. As a boy, Dunn learned to canoe, fish and hunt. He attended Blake School before heading to Amherst College in Massachusetts.

He dropped out of Amherst to join the Marines during World War II. Later, after the war and graduation from Amherst, he settled in Princeton.

In retirement, Dunn served for 13 years on the board of the nonprofit Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. In 2009, then-MCEA Executive Director Martha Brand called Dunn "a quintessential gentleman, lovely person and a shrewd problem solver."

George Dunn said of his father: "It bothered him when industry did not step up to take care of the waste they had created. ... He was a businessman and environmentalist. The Republican Party went so far in the other direction that, after he retired, he couldn't even get elected a delegate to the [Mille Lacs County Republican] convention."

Dunn's first wife, Mary Louise Caley, died in 1969. He married Bette Lee Hedenstrom in 1972. In addition to wife Bette and son George, he is survived by daughters Ruth Dunn, Susan Dunn and Libby Dunn Query; another son, Bill Dunn; stepchildren Bob Hedenstrom and Mary Leirimo; 14 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

"Bob was always there for the good of his constituents, our state and our natural heritage." — Peter Gove, an aide to the late Gov. Wendell Anderson