

Legislative Report - Winter 2022

By Mike Brust
WBH Legislative Liaison

The legislature is taking advantage of the fact that the DNR is in disarray over the wolf controversy and several other issues. Over the last couple months legislators have introduced several bills, both in the Assembly and Senate, relating to hunting and fishing issues that are generally handled by the DNR.

Part of this comes from the DNR's resistance to respond to genuine hunters' concerns, who then go to their legislators; and it's part politics, where the DNR is being manipulated by the governor from one party and the legislators from the other party are countering by exerting their authority, where perhaps in the past, they would have left it up to the DNR to regulate by rule.

Neither extreme is good for us as hunters.

The biggest concerns with game and resource management by statute (state law) is that the legislature, as a whole, isn't particularly aware of all the ramifications of these type of actions, as few are actually avid hunters. Also, once a law is passed and signed, it is extremely difficult to "undo" it in the future if unanticipated ramifications occur. DNR rules, on the other hand, can be, and often are, changed or modified from year to year.

However, if the DNR itself becomes political, which has become clearly evident over the last several months, and is guided by political agendas that don't always align with the best interests of hunters, hunters need to find support where it's available.

Some of these new bills are quite benign, like allowing the use of a driver's license to verify residency (SB422) or allowing hunting/fishing license buyers to register to donate organs (AB578 & SB556). Others have to do with gun rights. AB669 and SB619 seek to eliminate the need for a specific concealed carry permit under many circumstances.

However, several have to do with controlling actual game and fish management. SB609 and AB677 lay out detailed pheasant stocking levels, locations and times. AB667 and SB620 require the DNR to establish a Sandhill crane season; and AB658 and AB673 require increased fish stocking.

And then there is the already widely-criticized AB671 to consolidate the turkey seasons and zones.

AB598 and SB563 seek to alter the regulation of captive non-deer cervids. At this time there are real questions about the impact it would have on the spread of CWD.

Two others seek to expand recruitment of new hunters. AB690 would expand the availability of on-line hunter education to those under 18, although like adults they would still be required to attend in-person field training and testing by a certified instructor. The other, AB670 seeks to allow a hunter that's been mentored in a mentored hunt, to consider that as their field training, but testing would still be required by an instructor.

However, my greatest concern is with two bills which stem from constant complaints that DNR regulations are too extensive and too cumbersome. And while that is true, I have served on several committees over the years to streamline DNR regulations, and can say that it's not as simple as it sounds. Almost all regulations are in place for a reason, and many are intricately intertwined with other rules that are affected each time a change is made. For example, one "simplification" that is cited regularly would be to "just combine crossbows and archery." I think we all understand the catastrophic impact that would have on bowhunting and the future of bowhunting in Wisconsin. AB659 insists that the DNR provide a report to the legislature on ways to consolidate or eliminate the number of hunting, fishing and trapping approvals (license types). AB676 goes even further by requiring the DNR to eliminate 3 regulations for every one it adds.

There is one bill introduced by the governor's party: SB580 to eliminate the requirement for a wolf hunt if they are not listed as endangered or threatened. It is unlikely to get very far in this legislature.

None of these bills are specifically in regard to bowhunting, but as you can see, many of them will have an impact on our sport. Bills usually take a long time to work through the legislative process and many never make it to the floor, much less the governor's desk, but in this intense political climate it's difficult to say what will happen. However, be assured that we will continue to monitor each, testify if necessary, and make certain that the interests of bowhunters are always considered.

Finally, thank you to all of you that contacted your legislators or testified in Madison against AB165 and SB192 to combine the archery and crossbow seasons. All indications are that both bills have been dropped and are effectively "dead." However, we will remain vigilant because we never know when someone will try to "sneak something through."