

Legislative Update Spring 2022

This session of the legislature has been a busy one. The natural resources part of it has been dominated by what some lawmakers called the freedom package. These bills range from pheasant and fish stocking to game farms, to hunter education and gun rights, and beyond. At this point many are bogged down waiting for a hearing.

Most of these bills are good examples of why it is not always advisable for the legislature to dictate hunting regulations. Wisconsin, like most other states, has a department for that, it's called the WI DNR.

In Wisconsin any citizen can contact their legislator and make a complaint or suggest a change in the law to address their specific concern or idea. Legislators often feel the need to respond to their constituents, sometimes even if it is only one, and draft a bill. Many feel that's their job – and what they must do to get re-elected. They then circulate the bill to their colleagues in the capitol to sign-on as co-sponsors. These co-sponsors often have only a cursory knowledge of the subject, but are anxious to add their name to a "good idea" so they can show their constituents back in their district that they are doing something. Sometimes it's no more than a tit for tat, so that when they have a bill, they can count on co-sponsors. Some authors look for bipartisan support, but if they are in the minority party, their bills often have little chance of making it through the process and arriving on the governor's desk.

The problem is most legislators don't hunt seriously, and therein lies the problem. What sounds like a "good idea" from one constituent may be a disaster overall. But once the ball starts rolling, it's hard to stop, and co-sponsors don't like to admit they made a mistake, even if more facts come out. And that's another part of the problem – sometimes the facts don't come out because this happening in the capitol and the affected public isn't aware of what's going on. In many cases, politics and special interest lobbyists have the greatest influence on a bill's success or failure.

All that being said, there are some checks and balances that help. In the case of hunting laws, before they go to the full assembly or senate, they normally go to their respective Sporting Heritage Committees for review and approval. These committees are generally made up of more avid sportsmen and women. But not always. I spent over two hours with a member of the assembly Sporting Heritage Committee to convince him that AB165 (the crossbow bill) was not a good idea. He said he didn't hunt, "but had friends that did". The other redeeming factor is that the process takes a long time for a bill to get passed, often many months, sometimes over a year. That give folks that know about the bill time to react. This is where special interest groups come in, and make no mistake, WBH is a special interest group. We don't have a lobbyist, and there are well-funded groups like the anti-hunters and even crossbow manufacturers that often oppose us. But with our dedicated membership in almost every voting district in the state, we can be a force they listen to, especially if we can mobilize our membership to contact their legislators. Calls to their offices from a voter in their district make a huge difference.

And while I personally believe that almost all regulations that deal with hunting should be set by our DNR, I realize that our DNR has changed, dramatically, over the last several years, and especially in the last year or two. Although the majority of the DNR is funded directly from the revenue from our hunting and fishing licenses, the DNR now takes the position that it doesn't matter. Very much of what they do

now is based on "public opinion", and if the anti-hunters and animal-rights groups raise a louder voice, that's who they listen to. The governor now directs the DNR, and it's all about being re-elected.

As for AB165 and SB192 to redefine crossbows as bows and combine them into the archery season, we were out-manuevered by the author of AB165. Most that spoke at the assembly committee hearing last June, including several WBH members, were opposed, and several committee members received calls at their offices opposing the bill. All indications were that there wasn't enough support at the time to even bring it out of committee. However, the author, representative Tittl from Manitowoc, who shoots a crossbow and has said he would "never allow the crossbow season to be shortened", stalled the vote for several months and then arranged for a private meeting between the committee and a representative of the DNR (that nobody will name) who told the committee that the long crossbow season is a good thing and that there was no problem with combining crossbows with archery equipment. We found out about this one day before the vote was taken, with no additional public input allowed. AB165 then passed by a split vote out of the Assembly Sporting Heritage Committee. At this point it looks like AB165 may get to the assembly floor for a vote.

However, the companion senate bill, SB192, has yet to be taken up by the senate Sporting Heritage Committee, and may never be if that committee chair decides not to hear it. We have good relationships with some of the senators on that committee. They are more avid hunters and understand many of the negative impacts of this bill. We are confident that if it is heard by senate Sporting Heritage, and we get the membership support again that we had for the assembly version, that it won't be supported by the senate committee. There are also some very high-profile folks supporting us on this from behind the scenes. I have also been assured that we will be privy to any "secret" meetings with the DNR if that's attempted. And, if either bill fails or isn't heard by the end of the session, the whole thing is "dead". As mentioned, we are confident, but there is always "backscratching" going on in Madison, so we will remain vigilant through the end of the session.

Thanks again to all that have helped with calls and hearing appearances, they really do make a big difference!

Mike Brust
WBH Legislative Liaison