

Legislative Update

The current session has been a busy one as it relates to hunting issues. Some of these bills have even made it to the evening news.

After a dismal deer hunting season in the north, despite very good conditions and an early gun opener, hunters there were demanding a restored deer population. That was met however, with excuses from the DNR and comparisons to recent (poor) years, suggesting that it “wasn’t so bad”.

With that type of response, many deer hunters turned to their legislators for help.

Personally, in a perfect world, I think wildlife management decisions should be made by the DNR and not the legislature, for a couple reasons. First, many legislators, probably the majority, don’t hunt. Because of that, they can be convinced to promote laws based solely on what they have been told, not their own practical knowledge. This makes them an ideal target for the anti’s, concentrated in Madison. The other reason is that making those decisions is the DNR’s job. The DNR is one of the biggest bureaucracies in Wisconsin, and in some cases, they are purposefully not doing their job. Why? Sometimes it’s because they don’t want to offend anyone or any group, and sometimes it’s because the top management, and those directing it, are supporting a different agenda.

Unfortunately, as structured, the DNR has virtually no direct accountability to the public.

So, hunters’ only alternative is to get the legislature involved.

In the case of the lack of deer in the north, legislators have proposed bills AB1030 & SB965 to prohibit the issuance of bonus doe tags in the northern forest zone, and limit no more than 1 doe tag be issued with archery and 1 with gun licenses. This has been incorrectly reported in many instances by saying all doe hunting there would be prohibited. And while some consider it a drastic move, others point out that in some areas, unless the predator load is reduced, it still won’t be enough to bring the deer population back. I did speak to the author who explained that this bill isn’t intended to be the long-term solution, it’s meant to “stop the bleeding” long enough to develop a comprehensive management plan to bring favorable deer hunting back to the north. At this point, even if it makes it through both chambers, it’s unknown if the governor will sign it.

It has also been suggested, particularly by an outdoor editor, that the current deer management structure be scrapped, and we return to the previous DMU structure controlled by the DNR. While there is logic in managing deer by habitat type, that can be done in the current framework if counties are allowed to do it within their borders. The

other risk of changing back is taking away (at least theoretical) control by the county representatives and giving complete control to the DNR, who has been less responsive in recent years and often predisposed towards a smaller deer population. The real problem with the current system is the structure of those groups represented on the CDAC's. Very often they too are weighted towards a reduced deer population. I can also say, as a member of my county's CDAC, that most CDAC's still aren't independent of the DNR. Much of the information provided and "recommendations" are still controlled by the DNR.

Other bills of interest are:

- AB1036 to increase nonresident license fees
- SB587 to define the functional parameters of a muzzleloading firearm
- AB1038 to manage wildlife damage claims and funding by the DNR, instead of through individual counties
- SB994 to provide grants for double fencing game farms
- SB310 to allow state identification cards to be used to define residency

As well as other bills reported previously.

Interestingly, AB934, to combine crossbows into the archery regulations, has not moved forward, perhaps because of stated opposition by bowhunters, including WBH. And, with a diminished deer herd in the north, legislators may be looking for disproportionate harvest data, which the specific crossbow harvest would clearly show. We are still watching AB934 carefully, to make certain it isn't rushed through at a later date.

Another subject that hasn't been formally proposed, because it would be vetoed by the governor, is to insist that the DNR establish a numeric wolf population goal in the recently released wolf management plan.

On a bright note, in-person Spring Hearings are back. Be sure to attend in your county on Monday April 8th at 7PM.