

Legislative Update Spring 2025

The elections are over, and the new legislative session is underway. While there are no serious hunting-related bills submitted so far, the legislative activity over the next couple of months will revolve around the budget.

Every two years the governor proposes a budget that must be approved by the legislature. Unlike the federal government, Wisconsin's constitution requires a balanced budget; but of course, it does not always work out that way. If expenditures exceed the anticipated income, a deficit occurs. This deficit must be resolved in the following bi-annual budget. However, if expenses are kept below revenue, a surplus can occur and be maintained - often referred to as our "rainy day" fund. Due to a healthy economy since covid, Wisconsin has been able to develop and maintain a significant "rainy day" fund.

The latest budget proposal by the governor includes many areas of substantial spending. These increases will need to be offset by an increase in fees, taxes and using the "rainy day" fund. Some of the increases the governor is proposing will affect hunters directly. One way this budget will affect hunters is through a license fee increase. On average, the governor is proposing to approximately DOUBLE the cost of all Wisconsin resident hunting licenses, with some increasing by approximately 125%. Ironically, his proposed increases for non-resident fees are much smaller on a percentage basis.

Because there have not been any increases in quite some time, there is an argument for a modest increase; but legislators, and those of us that contribute our license dollars, should have direct knowledge of where those dollars are going. Currently we do not know, and legislators have been asking for years for an audit of the Fish and Wildlife account. To date, this has not been granted.

On a weekly, if not almost-daily basis, I receive communication, informational emails, and reports from the DNR about what they are doing. Most of these communications have little or nothing to do with hunting or fishing.

Interestingly, in reading the "condensed" version of the governor's budget it includes substantial spending increases for things like:

- Repairing and maintaining tribal fish hatcheries
- Develop more non-lethal abatement practices for wolves.
- Stewardship and education programs in the ceded territories
- Increased funding for the Endangered Species program
- Over \$30 million to study climate risk, and grants for "green" projects

- Hiring a state Wild Rice Coordinator and relax wild rice labeling requirements for the tribes.

Even in the condensed version of the budget, the governor includes another full page of grants and concessions to the tribes. It is my understanding that the tribes, who make large profits from their casinos, are huge contributors to political campaigns.

The good news related to all of this is that the legislature must approve the final budget, and fortunately, both houses are controlled by Republicans, who have been able to hold the line on excessive spending in the past. So, over the next few months, there will be ongoing negotiations before a budget is approved. Also, I have been assured that huge increases in hunting license fees will not be approved unless legislators are allowed an audit of the Fish and Wildlife account to confirm our dollars are spent wisely.