

February 7th, 2024

Testimony on Assembly Bill 1030

Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage

Thank you, Chairman Pronschinske and other Assembly committee members, for having a hearing on Assembly Bill 1030 relating to the regulation of deer hunting in the northern forest zone.

Deer hunting has been a tradition for generations in Northern Wisconsin. But those traditions have been thrown by the wayside because the population of deer has been decreasing for years. This year was no different. When it comes to the harvest totals in the Northern Forest Zone during the gun deer season, buck harvests were down 14.7% compared to the five-year average, and doe harvests were down 27.2% compared to the five-year average. This decline is the largest out of the deer management zones.

According to the DNR handout I gave everyone, out of the about 18 counties that occupy the Northern Forest Zone, about 13 counties need an increase in the deer population.

There could be several factors that could have led to the down deer harvest this year and the need to increase the deer population. The first is the harsh winters we have had for the past two years. The second could be the lack of food sources. The last factor could be the number of predators in Northern Wisconsin compared to the rest of the state. These include bears, coyotes, bobcats, and wolves.

After the miserable deer season up north, Northern Wisconsin legislators have held multiple listening sessions with hunters to figure out what to do to solve this issue. We have also heard from all sorts of hunters that they don't trust the DNR and the local arm of the DNR, which are the CDAC committees, when it comes to deer and other wildlife management. So that is where this bill came about.

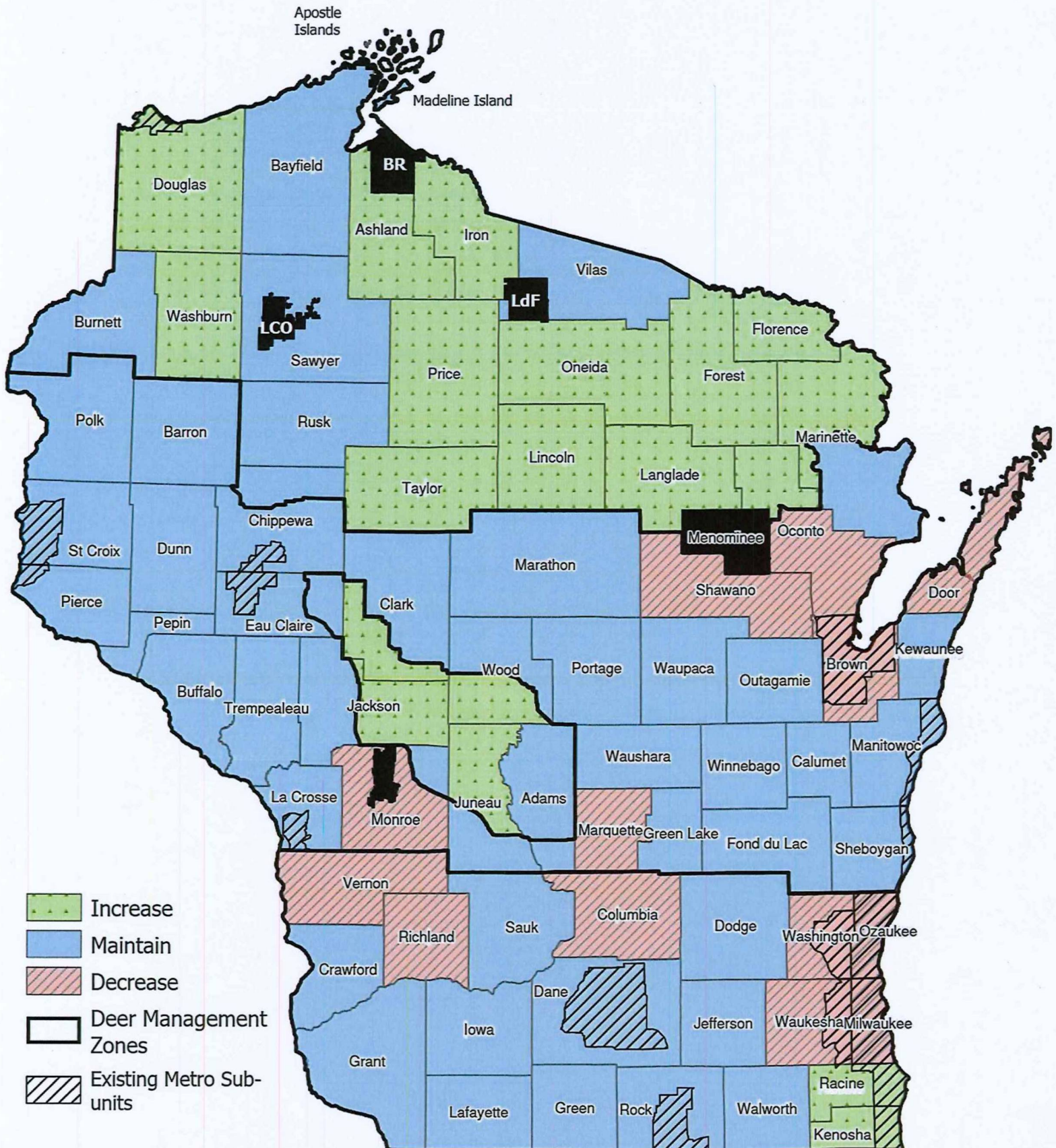
AB 1030 does several things:

1. This bill would prohibit the DNR from establishing a hunting season on does in the Northern Forest Zone.
2. This bill would prohibit the DNR from issuing more than two buck tags per person in the Northern Forest Zone, meaning you only get one tag for a muzzle-loading firearm or a regular firearm. Then, you only get one tag for bow and arrow or crossbow.
3. These restrictions would last four years.

The purpose of this legislation is to work with the DNR, all the hunting groups, and the hunters up north over the next four years to put a proper deer management plan in place for Northern Wisconsin. We want future generations to enjoy the tradition of hunting in Northern Wisconsin, and this bill is a good start to making that happen.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work on this bill with my colleague from the Senate, Senator Quinn. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.

Population Objectives, Deer Management Units and Deer Management Zones 2021-2023





Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage
2023 Assembly Bill 1030
Deer Hunting in the Northern Forest Zone
February 7, 2024

Good morning, Chair Pronschinske and members of the Committee. My name is Jeff Pritzl, and I am the Deer Program Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). With me today to help answer questions is Eric Lobner, Wildlife Management Program Director. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Assembly Bill 1030 (AB 1030), related to deer hunting in the Northern Forest Zone.

Hunters have a long history of being willing to make sacrifices in current harvest opportunity in order to improve future experiences. The legacy of prohibiting overharvest of our wild game has been honored for decades and appreciated by generations. We believe the intention of the proposed bill is a reflection of that commitment. However, our testimony will highlight several possibly unintended consequences of AB 1030.

The bucks plus antlerless quota system has always provided for the option to hold a "bucks only" season on a unit-by-unit basis. It is the unusual year when there are no bucks only units. On occasion much of the north experiences a bucks only season; the most recent being in 2014 when 17 out of 18 units were bucks only. The 2019 harvest generated a similar buck harvest in the north as 2023, yet only Forest County was designated as a bucks only unit the following year. The buck harvest improved over the next 3 years while still providing over 20,000 northern forest deer hunters the opportunity to bring home venison in the form of an antlerless deer.

This bill creates a restriction in deer harvest opportunity without the involvement of our County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs). Should this proposal become law, there would be multiple tradeoffs and unintended consequences that would occur. These include the following:

- a. Under the Deer Management Assistance Program, (DMAP) the department may issue antlerless permits to a participant to aid them in meeting management goals for their property. In the Northern Forest Zone, many participants enroll in the program because they are concerned about locally overabundant deer numbers but are unable to obtain antlerless permits over the counter. If the intent of the bill is to still allow antlerless permits to be issued to DMAP participants, we can anticipate an overwhelming increase in applications, requiring staffing resources to both process the applications and provide services to program participants. If the bill's intent is to restrict antlerless permits from being issued to DMAP participants, the value of the program would be significantly reduced, which could cause frustration for participants and have an overall negative impact to the program.
- b. The sale of antlerless permits provides nearly all the funding for the wildlife damage claims program, which provides compensation to agricultural producers who experience damage to crops and livestock caused by a variety of wildlife species. The prohibition of antlerless permit sales in the north will reduce funding by hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. This

reduction in funding could be sufficient to cause us to prorate claims. Proration would impact producers statewide and cause much frustration.

- c. The sale of antlerless permits in CWD-affected counties generate the primary funding to support chronic wasting disease sampling and monitoring,
- d. Currently, the department issues Metro Subunit antlerless permits in Douglas County to help the City of Superior manage conflicts associated with high deer numbers. Under the bill, these permits could no longer be issued.
- e. Surveillance permits issued for enhanced CWD monitoring if needed in a county with a new positive detection would be limited to bucks only.
- f. The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore has a unique deer management strategy and permit authority designed to encourage deer harvest to protect the sensitive vegetation communities on the islands from over-browsing by deer. Additional buck harvest permits are granted to hunters for harvesting antlerless deer as an incentive. This bill would prevent this management strategy on the islands.
- g. Hunters aged 17 and under are issued an antlerless permit that is valid statewide to increase their opportunity to experience success early in their hunting career. This bill would render the Junior Antlerless permit invalid in the Northern Forest Zone for four years.
- h. CDACs were established to seek public input and make recommendations on antlerless permit availability to the DNR. This bill would significantly reduce the role of CDACs in the Northern Forest Zone for four years.
- i. Antlerless harvest generates an age composition sample that is needed for population modeling. The proportion of the antlerless harvest that is 1.5 years old is a strong indicator of herd productivity. A four-year absence of aging data will significantly compromise the population tracking ability of the northern forest herd.

Additionally, there are some other unintended consequences that may occur. Although the Northern Forest Zone covers a relatively similar landscape dominated by forest, there is a measurable difference between the northern and southern tier counties related to average snow depth and ability to carry deer through the winter. While the northern tier counties hold bucks only seasons relatively often, they are rarely necessary in the southern tier counties. Holding successive bucks only seasons in these southern tier counties will likely allow deer numbers to increase to a level that puts excessive pressure on natural forage, reducing overall herd health and resilience, as well as increasing agriculture damage and deer-vehicle collisions.

Further, while the intention of the bill is directed toward recovery of deer numbers and ultimately recovery of hunter participation, it may have the opposite effect. Perceived lack of harvest opportunity may encourage some hunters to seek new opportunities in other parts of the state or discontinue hunting completely. Over the course of four years, new routines and traditions may become established. Even if harvest opportunity improves in the north, we cannot expect that hunters will return to previous routines.

Much of the dialogue that has occurred in recent years has been focused on recapturing the past with management techniques that were effective in the past. The world of deer hunting has changed over the past three decades. As we continue, our approach and expectations will need to be adjusted accordingly.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



February 7, 2024
Assembly Public Hearing – Committee on Sporting Heritage
Assembly Bill 1030

Good Morning
Committee Chair Pronschinski and Committee Members

My name is Tom Hittle, and I am here today in my capacity as chair of the Wisconsin Council on Forestry, and as a forester with 38 years of professional experience managing forest lands in northern Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Council on Forestry is a diverse group of forestry community leaders, appointed by the governor, who support Wisconsin's efforts to achieve sustainable forestry. The Council was created by State Statute 26.02 in 2002 to advise the governor, legislature, Department of Natural Resources, and other state agencies on a wide range of forestry issues. In addition to our 16 forestry community members, our legislative members include Senators Quinn and Smith and Representatives Mursau and Shankland.

The Council has a long history of engaging in discussions about the dynamic relationship between white-tailed deer and Wisconsin's forests. Our last formal position paper was in 2017, and while that is in the process of being reviewed and updated, we believe the core concepts of our 2017 position are relevant to the discussion today regarding Assembly Bill 1030.

The Council recognizes that the intertwined relationship between healthy deer populations, hunter experience, forest management and tree regeneration is complicated.

Ecological impacts to Wisconsin's forests in areas of heavy browsing are well observable and known. Economic impacts are harder to quantify but the inability to successfully regenerate vigorous forests has significant consequences for our \$24 billion dollar WI forest industry. Low deer populations, on the other hand, can result in undesirable hunting experiences, decreased wildlife recreational opportunities, and affect hunter participation numbers. Contributions to Wisconsin's economy from hunting and related wildlife opportunities also deserve consideration.

The Council has devoted significant time, especially over the last 4 years, toward efforts to support, develop and diversify our forest industry – an industry that faces many significant ongoing challenges. The connection between a strong industry, and the active forest management, including harvesting timber, that creates the habitat needed for healthy deer populations, cannot be overlooked. We need to support our industry to have the habitat in the amount needed to sustain reasonable deer populations appropriate for our hunters.

Wisconsin's Council on Forestry believes it is imperative to work toward better understanding of how goals for deer hunting and regenerating our forests through sustainable forest management can complement each other to realize society's need for renewable forest resources. We encourage decision-makers to value the voice of the forest industry, professional foresters and wildlife managers, and all Wisconsinites who care about the future of our forests and our overall ecosystem health when making deer management decisions.

Development of County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs) empowered deer hunters and foresters, as well as tourism, transportation, tribal interests, urban interests, and agriculture with a role in regulating deer populations within their respective county.

Broad, one size fits all, deer management strategies, or decisions using arbitrary or uniformed boundaries, or defined time periods, such as noted in Assembly Bill 1030 may not address the unique habitat, and other dynamic factors that determine deer herd size and the consequential impacts on forest regeneration. Going forward, hunting regulations and deer population goals must consider impacts of disproportionate deer densities that contribute to poor hunter experience in some areas and significant impacts on forests from deer browse in other areas.

Healthy forests are important to the citizens of Wisconsin and to all wildlife populations. A disproportionate balance between deer numbers and healthy forests will, in the long run, do great harm to our natural resources, our forest products industry, and all aspects of outdoor recreation, as well as impairing our state's cultural and sporting heritage.

Wisconsin's Council on Forestry believes that working toward better understanding of how deer hunters' expectations and forest managers' goals can complement each other will benefit both.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this discussion today. The Council on Forestry looks forward to continuing to participate in this important discussion.

Tom Hittle
Chair – WI Council on Forestry
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To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage
From: Tom Hauge, Chairperson- Wisconsin's Green Fire Wildlife Workgroup
Re: AB 1030 – Regulation of deer hunting in the northern forest

I'm writing on behalf of Wisconsin's Green Fire to urge your committee not to advance AB 1030. This bill may be well-intentioned, but it is the wrong solution for Wisconsin's northern forest deer herds. It mandates a "one size fits all" ban on antlerless deer hunting across 18 counties for four years. This mandate eliminates the role of County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs) to annually review county-specific data on the deer herd and also make informed recommendations on antlerless deer quotas.

CDACs, together with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), annually review deer herd data and establish antlerless harvest quotas to achieve the desired population goal. They consider concerns from hunters, farmers, forest owners, and other stakeholders. This process has demonstrated the ability to grow, stabilize or decrease local deer herds. Simply put, there is no need for AB1030...the current system is data-driven, is responsive to a wide array of stakeholders and is flexible enough to respond to regional/local changes.

The northern forest varies from north to south and east to west. This variation means that deer herds also respond differently to the many regional and local factors that can impact deer herd size. The best approach to address concerns is at the local deer management unit level.

Wisconsin's Green Fire strongly recommends that Wisconsin DNR begin work to create a long-term strategic plan to guide future deer management of the northern forest deer herd, as well as the rest of the state. This includes modifying the boundaries of existing deer management units to better match the ecological landscapes that greatly impact deer population trends. Good deer management requires good data to be successful. We need good data on habitat conditions, deer herd condition, and citizen interests to guide annual decisions. We recommend the legislature ensure that adequate funding is provided to gather high-quality data needed for conservation of our cherished deer herds.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and we look forward to your passage of this important legislation.

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