

Wisconsin's Green Fire: Voices for Conservation

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Wisconsin's Green Fire Testimony to

Assembly Committee on Natural Resources & Sporting Heritage

Regarding AB 712

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to provide information on Assembly Bill 712. My name is Tom Hauge and I am speaking on behalf of Wisconsin's Green Fire – Voices for Conservation. Wisconsin Green Fire is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing science-based, natural resource management information to Wisconsin's decision makers. Our membership has extensive experience in resource management, environmental law and policy, scientific research, and education. Our members have backgrounds in government, non-governmental organizations, universities and colleges and the private sector.

Green Fire is very aware of the frustration that exists with current law that, because of a December 2014 court decision, has reclassified gray wolves in Wisconsin as federally endangered and preempted state management authority. Green Fire supports federal delisting as quickly as possible. Wolves are recovered in Wisconsin. We have a science-based wolf management plan and skilled conservation staff to implement this plan for a healthy and sustainable wolf population.

The authors of AB 712 indicate this bill was introduced in frustration due to a lack of federal action to address the problems caused by the court decision. We have prepared an analysis of the conservation science and resource management impacts that will result if AB 712 is enacted. A copy of the analysis is attached to our testimony.

There are two pathways for federal delisting to occur. The first involves Congressional action like what occurred in Western states, where Congress directed the USFWS to delist those wolf populations and further precluded judicial review of the USFWS action. Legislation to require delisting of the Western Great Lake Wolf Population has been introduced but hasn't yet passed out of Congress. The second delisting pathway involves the lengthy normal process of rule-making by USFWS where each step of the process is subject to litigation.

AB 712 will not compel either Congress or the USFWS to take delisting action. It will, however, cause negative impacts to our state and may well make it tougher for our congressional delegation to convince their colleagues to advance the pending legislation.

AB 712 prohibits DNR from expending funds for managing wolves other than for paying claims for damage caused by wolves. This would require DNR to stop:

- All activities to gather information on wolf population abundance and distribution. This would include winter populations estimates, Snap Shot Wisconsin wolf monitoring, and any public informational outreach relating to the wolf populations;
- Terminate contracts with USDA-WS to provide wolf damage abatement assistance to landowners in Wisconsin and stop publishing wolf depredation alert maps that alert landowners and hunters to problem areas;

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- Examining wolves to screen for diseases that can impact other species and domestic livestock;
- Researching the impact of wolves on re-introduced elk populations at Clam Lake and Black River Falls, or improvements to population estimating procedures; and
- Convening the department's wolf advisory committee to share program updates, as well as, re-starting the long overdue update of the 1999 Wolf Management Plan.

Stopping these important work activities will hurt landowners seeking to avoid wolf damage, damage our knowledge base of the size and distribution of the wolf population at a time we need it for updates to the wolf management plan and to inform future wolf harvest quota decisions, as well as weaken our ability to provide solid support to federal decisions on the recovery of Wisconsin wolves.

AB 712 also prohibits law enforcement officers in Wisconsin from enforcing laws relating to the management of wolves or the illegal killing of wolves in Wisconsin. This provision will send a very telling message across the country about our state's willingness to conserve wolves, making it harder to convince undecided members of Congress to support delisting. This provision has other negative impacts here in Wisconsin.

- The public expect fair and uniform treatment from our law enforcement officers who have taken an oath of office to uphold the laws of the state. Forcing our conservation wardens to walk away from a violation puts them in a terrible position and jeopardizes the public trust they have worked hard to earn.
- This provision creates a ready-made alibi that can be used as a legal defense for violations involving other species. "No sir Judge, I wasn't hunting bobcats out of season, I was hunting wolves." It would also create legal confusion around the use of poison baits to kill wolves that kill the neighbor's dog, or a bear.
- Our enforcement officers would be prevented from coming to the aid of a federal LE officer in need if that officer was enforcing a wolf violation.
- This provision would make it illegal for wardens to investigate fraudulent wolf damage claims.

Finally, our analysis finds that AB 712 by restricting and expressly prohibiting DNR's ability to properly conserve Wisconsin's wolf populations creates the risk for additional litigation over management authority for fish and wildlife within the Ceded Territory of Wisconsin, as well as, creates the risk that Wisconsin will not meet the eligibility requirements needed to receive federal Pittman-Robertson funding which totaled \$19 million in FY17.

As I indicated at the start of my testimony, Wisconsin's Green Fire understands the frustration the current federal classification is causing. We believe wolves should be delisted and returned to state management. We support responsible efforts to pass federal legislation. Wisconsin should be well positioned to achieve this. Rep. Paul Ryan is Speaker of the House and can have great influence in getting the legislation acted upon. Both of Wisconsin's Senators have indicated support for the legislation and can offer a bipartisan voice to fellow senator's from around the country. Wisconsin's Green Fire offers our assistance to your committee and our federal delegation to work toward passage.

Thank you for time and attention.