

Chairman Craig Headland and members of the Finance and Taxation Committee,

I am testifying in support of HB 1408.

The state of North Dakota has a long history of being a state with strong wildlife diversity, hunting and outdoor recreation opportunities. Over the past 20 plus years a combination of agricultural expansion, oil and gas development, and urban development have competed with North Dakota's outdoor heritage. Add the fact that approximately 93% of North Dakota land is privately owned, and it's apparent that there are a lot of competing interests for what makes North Dakota special.

In 1997, the passing of HB 1395 created the Private Land Habitat and Access Improvement Fund. This fund is financed by hunters with the sales of hunting licenses in North Dakota, and interest accrued by the ND Game & Fish Department General fund. This bill created what is commonly known as the Private Land Open to Sportsmen (PLOTS) Program. PLOTS is a working lands program that gives enrolled landowners financial compensation for providing walk-in access for hunting during legal hunting seasons. Landowners are able to farm, graze, and hay this land, while getting compensation for providing hunting access. The early goal of this program was to enroll 1 million acres. Currently there are approximately 800,000 acres enrolled. That equates to only 2% of the entire North Dakota landscape.

According to the North Dakota Game & Fish Department, sales of hunting and fishing licenses have been on a steady decline the past 6 years. The ND Game & Fish Department relies entirely on license sales and excise tax from firearms, ammunition, fishing tackle, and boat sales to fund state conservation programs. Overall, the past year there was a decline of about 15,000 hunting and fishing licenses in North Dakota. That is nearly half a million dollars in declining sales for the ND Game & Fish Department. This does not account for the lost revenue in small towns across the State that do businesses with hunters and anglers that pass through these communities. Without hunters and anglers, North Dakota is at risk of losing the outdoor experience and legacy it was so fortunate to be graced with.

Between economic development, agricultural expansion, oil and gas development, less than 5% public land, and only 2% PLOTS acres, the need for public access for hunting has never been greater.

HB 1408 creates a multi-benefit opportunity.

- Provides landowners a property tax discount.
- Provides landowners additional revenue for their operation through tax savings and PLOTS compensation.
- Provides additional acres to sportsmen for hunting.
- Adds efficiency to the ND Game and Fish Department PLOTS enrollment process by encouraging longer contract agreements.
- Grows and encourages the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage.

I ask that you recommend HB 1408 be approved.

Thank you for your time and service.

Kerry Whipp