



Senate State and Local Government Committee
Testimony on HB 1183

North Dakota Game and Fish Department
Scott Winkelman, Chief Game Warden
March 9, 2023

Madam Chair Roers and members of the Senate State and Local Government Committee, my name is Scott Winkelman, Chief Game Warden for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. I am testifying today in support of HB 1183.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department law enforcement division includes 38 licensed peace officers, authorized by North Dakota Century Code (NDCC) to enforce state laws and make arrests. Currently, the Game Wardens are part of the regular PERS retirement plan. This bill would change the definition of peace officer under Subsection 12 of section 54-52-01 of the NDCC to include all peace officers employed by the state, including Game Wardens, and move them to the PERS law enforcement retirement plan. Beginning on January 1, 2016, the normal retirement date for Game Wardens became the rule of 90 and minimum age 60. Most of the officers hired by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department are hired while in their lower to mid-twenties and have served the state around 30 years when they reach the age of 55. The job duties of a Game Warden in North Dakota are high stress, both physically and mentally. When Game Wardens who have dedicated their lives and careers to serving and protecting the citizens and wildlife of our state are either physically or mentally ready to move to the next stage of their lives but are forced to keep working because they have not met their retirement age it becomes a potential liability for the officer, department, and the state. Officer productivity and moral decreases when the Game Wardens are working even though they are physically or mentally “checked out” and are only working because they are forced to by the retirement plan. Passing this bill would allow Game Wardens who have faithfully served to know they have the state’s support and an option to retire at an age between 55 and 60 and protect the state, department, and officer.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department also is having increased difficulty in the recruitment and retention of Game Wardens. Passing this bill would put the Game and Fish Department on equal footing with other law enforcement agencies in the state who are already members of the law enforcement retirement plan and allow all law enforcement officers employed by the state to be treated similarly and fairly. Therefore, the Department is asking the committee to send a recommendation of do pass for HB 1183 as written.