



House Energy and Natural Resources Committee  
Testimony on SB 2137

North Dakota Game and Fish Department  
Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Wildlife Veterinarian  
March 7, 2025

Chairman Porter and members of the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Dr. Charlie Bahnson. I serve as Wildlife Veterinarian for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (Department).

The question at hand is whether the authority to restrict hunting over supplemental feed should lie within the Governor's proclamation. The Legislature has considered this question before. Bills in 2007 and 2009 would have banned baiting statewide. Last session, HB 1151 would have legalized it statewide. All three bills failed, with the sentiment being that the flexibility afforded to Game and Fish, through Governor's proclamation, is the best way to manage a wildlife disease issue.

The thrust of our argument today is that management flexibility is important to preserve. That was demonstrated by our in-state carcass movement restrictions. As the distribution of CWD changed, we shifted to allowing movement within the state but requiring disposal via landfill. This works better for hunters, taxidermists, and meat lockers, but it still manages risk.

Although HB 1151 failed last session, the Department still took it as a call to readdress the issue. We worked with policymakers and stakeholders to form new guidelines for when to recommend applying or removing baiting restrictions based on surveillance data. For example, restrictions were in place in unit 2B and now they currently are not. The new guidelines are a compromise which strikes a more responsive balance between managing disease risk and respecting the preference of those who enjoy baiting for big game.

As Wildlife Veterinarian, I'll argue that it is an important tool. There are lots of wildlife diseases, all of which we are concerned about. Some also have implications for people or livestock -- things like brucellosis or bovine tuberculosis. If either of those diseases were to become established in our wildlife populations, it would be devastating for our livestock industry because you'd have continued risk of spillover from one to the other, threatening export markets. This has occurred in other states. Should either of these be detected, baiting restrictions would be foundational in limiting how much it spreads among wildlife and how big of a problem it becomes. Proclamation leaves this tool on the table.

The Department currently employs this tool in approximately half our hunting units to combat a specific threat: chronic wasting disease. This is a serious disease that we hope to keep rare in North Dakota. Under high infection rates, it will become another major driver of population

effects with recreational impacts. From our work with colleagues who manage western herds heavily infected with CWD, I can share that these impacts are not theoretical. They report fewer deer, disappearance of older age classes, lots of calls to come euthanize sick, neurologic animals, and fears from hunters of handling and consuming infected animals. We don't want this in North Dakota. We need the flexibility and responsiveness afforded through proclamation to combat it.

We're not dismissing how important baiting is to a lot of people. As a lifelong hunter, I can understand why some are upset. If baiting has been a part of how you hunt for years, it's hard to imagine hunting without it. When I go into the field, I want as much leeway as possible to hunt in my preferred style. However, regulations are in place to protect the resource - the resource that we all share. It is in everyone's interest for the deer herd to be as healthy as possible, for the good of wildlife, people, and livestock in this state.

Ultimately, the Department does its best to navigate some sort of middle ground on this issue, balancing the wishes of those who enjoy hunting over bait with the fact that both research and past agency experience demonstrate that congregating deer adds voluntary disease risk. Navigating this middle ground opens us up to criticism from both sides. We take plenty of it, but that's our job. We ask that you allow us to keep doing it.

The Governor is committed to managing this long-term disease with a commonsense approach. That requires the flexibility afforded through annual proclamation to address a changing, dynamic issue with a changing, dynamic approach. We ask you vote for a "do not pass" on this bill.