



Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee  
Testimony on SB 2137

North Dakota Game and Fish Department  
Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Wildlife Veterinarian  
January 17, 2025

Chairman Luick and members of the Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee, my name is Dr. Charlie Bahnson. I serve as Wildlife Veterinarian for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

The question at hand is whether the authority to restrict hunting over supplemental feed should lie within the Governors proclamation. The Legislature has considered this question before. Bills in 2007 and 2009 would have banned baiting statewide, while a bill from last session would have stripped the ability to restrict it. All three bills failed, with the sentiment being that a wildlife disease issue should be left up to the state game and fish agency and the flexibility within the Governor's proclamation. Today, we revisit the topic.

As Wildlife Veterinarian, I'll argue that this is an important tool. One aspect of my job is to monitor wildlife diseases in our state. Some are well established. Epizootic hemorrhagic disease, highly pathogenic avian influenza, and chronic wasting disease are a few examples. We also keep our eye out for other diseases that may be in our wildlife but are yet to be recognized. That's important because some have implications not just for wildlife, but also 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. Given this possibility, we hope to identify potential issues early and intervene before they become well established in our wildlife. With any of these disease issues, proclamation allows us to manage with flexibility and responsiveness compared to if it is set in state statute.

The Game and Fish currently employs this tool in a portion of the state to combat a specific threat: chronic wasting disease. CWD is a fatal brain disease that affects deer, elk, and moose. It's currently rare in our state which means it's very tempting to write off. However, as infection rates climb - as a larger portion of your herd consists of these sick animals - the impact becomes larger, to a point where you can no longer ignore it. That means finding sick deer. That means producing fewer mature animals to hunt. This new cause of mortality will cut into the "harvestable surplus" meaning fewer licenses if we're trying to maintain population levels. In the most extreme situations, that cause of mortality can outpace the herd's ability to compensate, resulting in population declines. The tipping point at which these things will happen will vary. In some western herds, declines were documented at as low as 30% infection rates. From our work

with colleagues who manage western herds heavily infected with CWD, I can also share that the impacts are real – fewer deer, disappearance of older age classes, lots of calls to come euthanize sick, neurologic animals. We don't want this in North Dakota.

Now all of this is based off evidence in the form of peer reviewed science, the gold standard for understanding these sorts of phenomena. You'll see that reflected in the CWD management plan and baiting document included in your packets.

We're not dismissing how important baiting is to a lot of people. And 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, we do our 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 to vote no on this bill.