



Testimony of Wisconsin's Green Fire on Public Hearing

2021 Senate Bill 620

October 19, 2021,
Room 201 SE, State Capitol

Good morning Chairman Stafsholt and members of the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF) regarding Senate Bill 620, related to hunting sandhill cranes.

Wisconsin's Green Fire has not taken a position on this legislation, and I am providing our comments for information purposes only. Please consider the following information as you consider SB 620:

- Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin are part of a regional Eastern Population of greater sandhill cranes that primarily breeds in Michigan, Minnesota, southern Ontario, and Wisconsin. **The eastern population was nearly extirpated in the 19th centuries and early 20th centuries due to unregulated hunting.** Since that time, conservation measures have allowed the population to recover and reoccupy much of its former range.
- As a migratory species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, any harvest of cranes is regulated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service together with state wildlife agencies through the regional Mississippi Flyway Council. **If a Wisconsin hunt is approved, the quotas, timing, and other elements of a hunt structure must be coordinated through the Flyway Council in conjunction with our neighboring states. The bill should reflect this requirement.**
- **Setting conservative, science-based quotas is essential.** Population modeling and experience in other states suggests strongly that **harvest rates greater than 4% are high enough to create risks of long-term population declines.** Populations harvested at levels $\leq 4\%$ may decline in the short-term but experience to date suggests those populations will stabilize at lower levels.
- Because Sandhill Cranes are long-lived and have relatively low reproductive rates, any harvest of cranes needs to be conservative, closely regulated, and requires accurate information on abundance, recruitment, mortality, and regional population trends. **As with almost every other species of game animal subject to recreational hunting, enabling legislation should authorize, but not require, the DNR to hold a season for cranes.**

- All evidence suggests that hunting during the fall migratory season at crane staging areas can be highly disruptive to cranes at a time when they are most vulnerable. **If crane hunting is allowed, all hunting activity should be prohibited from before dusk to after dawn when cranes are gathered on their nocturnal roosts at traditional staging and stop-over areas.**
- Large flocks of cranes feeding in spring on planted fields can reduce crop yields or force growers to replant entire fields. **Non-territorial cranes (younger birds that are too young to pair and defend a territory) are the primary consumers of spring corn.** Non-territorial birds can gather in large flocks in spring of 50 to 100 birds that forage over as much as 40 sq. miles.
- **There is no sustainable level of fall hunting that will significantly reduce spring damage to crops from sandhill cranes.** Crop damage from cranes occurs primarily in the spring when the cranes feed on the germinating corn seeds after planting, **however just as with all other waterfowl, recreational crane hunting is limited to late summer or fall.**
- Avipel, a non-toxic bird repellent seed treatment, is commercially available, highly effective, and is widely used by farmers to reduce crane damage. **Financial support to agricultural producers for use of seed treatments and other practices to reduce spring feeding damage would be the most direct and effective way to reduce crop losses from cranes.**
- **Cranes have high spiritual and social significance and are valued for different reasons by many people and cultures.** Cranes are a charismatic and popular species that attracts people to Wisconsin from all over the Midwest. More than 2 million people observed, photographed, or fed wildlife in Wisconsin in 2011, spending an estimated \$1.5 billion, including trip-related expenditures, such as food, lodging, and transportation.

Given the unique biology of sandhill cranes, it is especially critical that any consideration of a hunt ensure that state wildlife managers can establish a season structure in conjunction with our regional flyway council and partners in neighboring states, using the best available science.

WGF's Wildlife Work Group members including Dr. Robert Rolley, Dr. Stanley Temple, and Tom Hauge contributed to this testimony and they are available to consult with you or other members of the committee. Please contact me if you would like to follow up.

Sincerely,



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