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DATE: April 09, 2014
TO: Natural Resources Board
FROM: Larry Bonde

SUBJECT: Vilas County Enclosure Study

At the March 22, 2014, Wisconsin Conservation Congress Deer and Elk Committee meeting, there was a lengthy discussion on the Vilas county research project that would close 1050 acres of land purchased with Stewardship dollars to public access. The committee passed a position in opposition to the research project, largely because it came as a surprise to everyone there. Committee members hadn't heard anything about this project prior to this meeting and it had already been approved by the Natural Resources Board. On an April 3, 2014 conference call, the Executive Committee met with Al Phelan, Deer and Elk Committee Co-Chair, to discuss the Committee's recommendation. Karl Martin and Dustin Bronson, from DNR Science Services, joined the conference call to answer question. Ultimately, the WCC Executive Committee decided to table the recommendation from the Deer and Elk Committee to oppose this study and instead decided to take the many concerns we have been hearing from the public and present them to you.

The public and our Deer and Elk Committee have raised a number of legitimate concerns about this study. I could stand before you today and read off a list of all the questions I compiled regarding the practical application of the research to other areas of the state, the adequacy of the proposed fencing, the study being conducted in unnaturally small enclosures and whether or not any useful data can be extrapolated from that an applied to a natural setting, or that the study area is in the heart of the Superior Snow Belt. And the list goes on. We could have Karl Martin and Dustin Bronson address every one of those questions, but at this point these concerns are not the main issues. The first main issue is that the public does not feel they had any input on the development of this study. I don't know of anyone who was aware this project was taking place until a recent news story about this project. That includes our Vilas County Congress delegation. Secondly, because the public was not adequately engaged, they have no buy-in or stake in this project and without public support and understanding of any process, the end result will be skepticism and doubt. And finally, the closing of 1050 acres of land purchased with Stewardship dollars to public access without sufficient public input. We want to make sure that every other avenue for possible sites be exhausted before one acre of public land is closed to access; from other DNR owned property already fenced or already closed to public access to properties held by private citizens or corporations that are currently closed to public access.

As established by Wisconsin State Statutes, the Wisconsin Conservation Congress is officially recognized as the only natural resources advisory body in the state where citizens elect delegates to represent their interests on natural resources issues on a local and statewide level to the Natural Resources Board and the Department of Natural Resources. Their mission is to represent the citizens of Wisconsin by working with the Natural Resources Board and the Department of Natural Resources to effectively manage Wisconsin's greatest asset, our abundant natural resources, for present and future generations to enjoy.

I want to be clear the Congress understands the importance of research and I am not here to oppose this study. We also don't think it was intentionally hidden from the public. In speaking with our Vilas Co delegation we think some confusion may have occurred with the changing names of the property in question. When purchased with Stewardship dollars in 2009 it was known as the Hovel property. It was then referred to as the Ontonagon Tract and in October 2013 when the NRB approved this research project it was part of the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest. From talking with people in that area of the state no one was aware this proposal was tucked in a master plan amendment for the Northern Highland American Legion State forest.

So here we are, with study that has already been approved and is moving forward, that the citizens of this state feel no ownership of or investment in. This may be a very good study. Other than 10 minutes of questions and answers with Karl and Dustin on the Executive Committee conference call, I personally know very little about it. But from what the Congress is hearing, many in the public don't know or understand much about this study either. In the end, even the best science in the world will be of little value if the citizens do not feel it was properly vetted and the outcome of the study will likely be met with suspicion.

To allow for a thorough vetting of all of these issues, the Conservation Congress respectfully asks that you consider these concerns and revisit this project as an action item at a later meeting. Backing up a little and engaging the citizens will hopefully produce a study in which the Congress and the public feel they are partners and will be able to embrace the results to be used in future deer management.