June 27, 2018

(Chair Hilgenberg, Secretary Meyer, members of the Board,
Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today on a topic I am passionate about—ruffed grouse).

At the May Natural Resources Board meeting, Chair Bonde requested that the DNR consider decreasing the bag limit and eliminating the late season for ruffed grouse based on a widely observed and unexplained decline in the population that occurred last summer. This spring’s results from the drumming counts survey are in and support the observations of hunters and outdoorsmen that there has in fact been a significant decline in grouse numbers at a time in the grouse cycle when numbers should be increasing.

The research done in the past on the impact of hunting grouse populations is truly a mixed bag of results. Early studies from 1930-1970 indicated that hunting was compensatory and showed no effect on populations (Palmer 1956, Dorney and Kabut 1960, Palmer and Bennet 1963). There was a period of time in the mid 1940’s when Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan all had very low grouse populations. Wisconsin and Minnesota closed their seasons to hunting for two and three years respectively, while Michigan continued to allow hunting. All of the populations recovered.

However, Predation and hunting mortality in central Wisconsin (Small et al) concluded in 1991 that ruffed grouse numbers will be substantially reduced in areas of high hunting mortality and reduced immigration due to fragmented habitat.

Research supports the finding that late season hunting has a negative additive effect on populations. As seasons progress, the percentage of adult bird harvest versus juvenile bird harvest increases (Pennsylvania Game Commission data). The adult birds left going into the late season (December and January) are the breeding stock for the following spring. Birds removed from their home range at this time will not be replaced in the spring breeding season due to the fact that grouse only disperse annually in early fall.

It should be noted that all of the previously cited research took place prior to the introduction of the West Nile Virus which came to the US in 1999 and added an unknown variable to these population equations.

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.
The 2017 study *Ruffed Grouse population declines after introduction of WNV* (Glen Stauffer et al), concludes that in the face of WNV, managing habitat may not be sufficient to sustain grouse populations. (All research can be found on the Pennsylvania Game Commission’s website).

As a result of our further investigation and conversations with department staff, we have amended our previous request to the Board. The WCC is no longer requesting a reduction in the bag limit at this time, but we continue to request that you shorten the harvest season to end November 30 beginning with the 2018 season, eliminating the 14-year-old late season. In addition, we request that the Department immediately begin to develop a robust and comprehensive management plan for ruffed grouse in the state of Wisconsin, which does not have a management plan for this important gamebird. Further, the WCC would like to see the management plan incorporate the input from applicable partner organizations and hunters. We feel that there are additional opportunities to gather more complete and thorough data on grouse population trends through more timely hunter surveys and the Conservation Congress would very much like to be a part of developing a ruffed grouse management plan for this state.

Mike Riggle, Vice-Chair  
Wisconsin Conservation Congress