

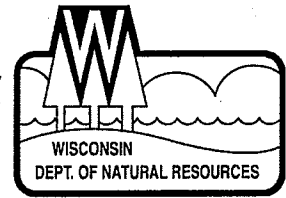


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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 38TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

**April 10, 2013: Assembly Committee on Natural Resources and Sporting
Heritage
Assembly Bill 6**

Thank you chairman Ott and members for holding a hearing today on Assembly Bill 6, relating to a catch and release only season for bass fishing. This bill establishes a catch and release only season for bass fishing in the areas of the state where there is not a continuous open season for bass fishing. An early catch and release season will not provide southern Wisconsin with anything that is not already available to the rest of the state, or in any way negatively impact the fish population. Additionally, it will provide additional income to tackle suppliers, gas stations, and additional launch fees to offset expenses that lake communities and the state incur to provide state mandated lake access. Most importantly, this legislation will provide easier and less expensive access to one of my favorite outdoor activities. Providing families in southern Wisconsin with the opportunity to fish earlier in the year and closer to home will help encourage the sport regionally and inevitably statewide. Once again, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this legislation.



Testimony of the Department of Natural Resources
2013 Assembly Bill 6

Fishing is one of Wisconsin's most popular recreational activities. Over half of adults in Wisconsin say they fish¹ and Wisconsin licenses about 1.4 million anglers who fish 22 million days each year. We rank 2nd in the nation in the number of non-resident fishing days. Fishing is also very important to Wisconsin's economy. It is a \$2.7 billion industry that supports over 30,000 jobs and generates almost \$200 million annually in state and local tax revenues – about 1/3 of that is from non-resident spending.²

Bass fishing in particular is extremely popular in Wisconsin. The same survey estimates that 28.5% of all anglers (403,000) and 19% of all days fishing (4.2 million days) are targeting largemouth and smallmouth bass.

Assembly Bill 6 seeks to expand bass fishing opportunities in Wisconsin by expanding the time during which anglers can fish for bass. Currently many waters have a closed season during the early spring during which anglers are prohibited from fishing for bass and other gamefish. AB 6 would require the Department to establish a catch and release season for bass on all waters which do not have a continuous open season. The season would begin on the first Saturday in March and end on the Sunday preceding the first Saturday in May.

The Department does not have any information that suggests changing the current closed seasons to catch and release seasons will have any biological impact on bass populations. There are a number of Wisconsin waters that currently have continuous open seasons and thriving bass populations. Also, the original intent of having closed seasons was likely to protect spawning bass, however the current closed seasons rarely encompass the bass spring spawning period across the state making their efficacy questionable. Among neighboring states, Michigan and Minnesota have comparable bass season closures while Illinois and Iowa do not have statewide bass closed seasons.

The Department does not have any specific information to estimate the increase in bass fishing that may occur if catch and release is allowed during the currently closed seasons. However, Wisconsin currently does have a catch and release season for bass in the northern part of the state from the regular inland opener through the third Saturday in June that is popular with anglers. Also, a 2012 Spring Hearing advisory question about eliminating closed seasons when they are not biologically necessary passed statewide by a 2427-1382 vote (61 counties approving).

There are some items that the Legislature may want to consider as it reviews this bill:

1. We anticipate enforcement problems if a season is open for catch and release bass fishing but closed to fishing for other gamefish. Currently during the proposed season anglers can only fish for panfish, the methods for which are easily distinguishable from gamefish methods. Fishing lures and bait used to catch bass are very similar and often the same as those for walleye, northern pike, and even muskellunge which would make it more difficult for wardens to determine the target fish of gamefish anglers.
2. The currently proposed dates for the catch and release season do not match with the various existing closed seasons. For example, the proposed catch and release season would start on the first Saturday in March, but the existing harvest season for inland waters does not close until the following day. Also there are different closed seasons for inland waters, Michigan and Minnesota boundary waters, and waters around Washington Island making it impossible to have a single statutorily specified season consistent with all.

3. The proposed bill generically applies to bass fishing, however Wisconsin currently regulates fishing for largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, rock bass, yellow bass, white bass, and hybrid striped bass. Currently there are no closed seasons except for largemouth and smallmouth bass, but clarifying which species are included would allow flexibility for future administrative code season changes for other species if they became necessary.

4. Traditionally, and as specifically authorized s. 29.014, Wis. Stats, setting of specific open and closed seasons has been done in Wisconsin through the administrative rule process with input from the Conservation Congress. Establishing seasons in administrative rules rather than statute allows the Natural Resources Board to consider the full range of public input and to have more flexibility in making future administrative code changes if conditions change. Legislative action in the 2007-09 Budget Bill to establish a muskellunge catch and release season instead of a closed season without going through the traditional Conservation Congress spring hearing process created considerable controversy with the Conservation Congress and other affected parties, and was eventually repealed.

The Department would be happy to provide any additional information, answer any questions, or assist in any way with addressing any of these issues.

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Citations:

¹ University of Wisconsin Survey Center. UW Badger Poll #29. VHS and AIS Questions and Results (#vhs02). December 3, 2009.

² US Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, and US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau. 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation.