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Chairman Stafsholt and Assembly Sporting Heritage Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a Public Hearing on AB 79 related to issuance of conservation patron licenses to certain veterans with disabilities.

I am honored to have worked with Senator Cowles on this legislation and I thank all the co-sponsors who have supported this bill.

This bill simply allows resident veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 50 percent or greater the ability to be issued a conservation patron license at a discounted rate.

The simple amendment extends the time period for implementation. We will likely need to adjust this once again before passage as the date in the current amendment is about a month away.

AB 79 affords veterans all the privileges that all conservation patron license holders are afforded. This includes, the combined privileges of certain approvals including small game, deer, and archer hunting licenses and an annual fishing license. It also allows the holder to take a motor vehicle into state parks without a vehicle admission receipt.

I am hopeful that we can continue to encourage folks to get outside and enjoy all the wonderful things that Wisconsin has to offer and I think that this bill will help support those families. I am further encouraged that this legislation will bring additional awareness about the conservation patron license and support renewed interest in conservation.

This is a wonderful way to give back to those who have given so much for us. Sporting heritage is part of our Wisconsin identity. This bill will open an opportunity for veterans to participate in these activities. Our families and friends can join together to support veteran access to Wisconsin tradition.

I appreciate your consideration of this bill and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony on 2019 Assembly Bill 79

Senator Robert Cowles

Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage – April 17, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Stafsholt and Committee Members, for allowing me to testify on 2019 Assembly Bill 79. This bill allows disabled veterans who have a qualifying service-connected disability but have not been conferred a Purple Heart the opportunity to purchase a Conservation Patron license for \$65 with fees, a \$100 discount.

This legislation, which was drafted after I was contacted by a constituent, is being introduced to extend the privileges conferred to Wisconsin's veterans with limited mobility. A number of other opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, and State Park System authorizations are available for free or at a reduced rate to disabled veterans. This bill just expands those options for disabled veterans who choose to call Wisconsin home.

The Conservation Patron license includes a fishing license and available stamps, small game and migratory bird licenses, archery and gun-deer licenses, turkey applications and permits, trapping licenses, an annual Parks sticker and State Trail Pass, and a subscription to the Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine. These privileges are conferred to residents for \$165 and non-residents for \$600. This price mimics a rate proposed by former Senator Tim Cullen in 2013 Senate Bill 692. Under current law, Purple Heart recipients have the opportunity to purchase a Conservation Patron license at a discounted rate of \$10, but no such discount is available to other disabled veterans.

Assembly Bill 79 requires that a state resident seeking the rate for a disabled veteran on a conservation patron license produces evidence that he or she has a service-connected disability rating of 50% or greater, as determined by the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, or is receiving disability benefits from the VA due to being unemployable based on his or her education and skills as well as his or her medical condition.

In the fiscal estimate prepared for Assembly Bill 79, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) noted that the Disabled Veteran Recreation Card, which is an annual approval that includes small game hunting, fishing, State Park entrance and State Trail access, sold an average of 1,643 cards during license years 2016 to 2018. The residents in this population may qualify for the reduced rate for disabled veterans on a Conservation Patron license established in this legislation. The DNR also notes that Assembly Bill 79 has the potential to increase revenues to the Fish and Wildlife Account by enticing more residents to purchase these approvals.

In response to a technical concern raised by the DNR, we've introduced a simple amendment to delay the implementation date of this legislation until the start of the next licensing season on March 1, 2020. Given the time that's passed since the Assembly Amendment 1 was introduced, a further implementation delay may be necessary. Not only will this avoid confusion by introducing a new price for the Conservation Patron license during the middle of a licensing season, but this amendment will allow the DNR to implement the new pricing structure and give the DNR time to provide education and outreach to potentially interested parties on the new reduced cost for a Conservation Patron license for disabled veterans.

There's no reason that a disability should stop anyone from enjoying the best that Wisconsin's natural resources and sporting heritage can provide. By lowering the fees for disabled veterans to align this discount with other reduced fees available to disabled veterans, we can better show our gratitude to those who sacrificed in service of our nation.



Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage

2019 Assembly Bill 79

Issuance of conservation patron licenses to certain veterans with disabilities January 30, 2020

Good morning Chairman Stafsholt and Committee members. My name is Linda Olver, Policy Advisor in the Bureau of Customer and Outreach Services of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Thank you for the opportunity to testify for informational purposes on Assembly Bill 79 (AB 79), which creates a reduced fee conservation patron license for certain resident disabled veterans.

AB 79 allows the Department to honor the sacrifice of disabled veterans by offering a conservation patron license for \$65 instead of the current \$165. A resident who produces evidence they are a veteran and are receiving disability benefits for a service-connected disability that is 50 percent or greater or who is individually unemployable would be eligible for this product.

The requirement to provide proof of meeting eligibility criteria is included in the bill and is an important component to ensure the integrity of veteran benefit programs. However, the disability determination documentation contains sensitive medical information. The Department would like to work with the Wisconsin Department of Veteran Affairs (WDVA) in the future to establish a method by which the Department could verify veterans' current disability rating electronically or through County Veteran Service Officers, rather than requiring veterans to physically present sensitive disability rating documentation in-person to a customer service representative or retail sales agent.

The Department is currently authorized by statute to offer a Disabled Veteran Recreation Card (includes small game, fishing, state park entrance, and state trail use) and a Disabled Veteran Fishing license. The same resident disabled veterans that would qualify for the proposed reduced fee conservation patron license are also eligible for these products. During license years 2016-2018, an average of 1,643 resident disabled veterans purchased the Disabled Veteran Recreation Card and an average of 3,539 resident disabled veterans purchased the annual disabled fishing license.

State statute generally prohibits a person from holding more than one of the same type of an approval. As such, the licensing system is programmed to not offer for purchase an approval that is already held by that customer. For example, a person who holds an annual fishing license is not offered a patron license, as the patron product already includes a fishing license. If this bill were to become effective in the middle of a new license year, a disabled veteran who already held a Disabled Veteran Recreation Card or a Disabled Veteran Fishing license would be ineligible to purchase the reduced fee Conservation Patron license without Department staff administratively voiding and refunding the current approval.

I would also like to note that a delayed effective date for this proposal would be beneficial, as it would allow for more time to help ensure better communication and a smoother implementation process. Assembly Amendment 1 includes what was formerly considered a delayed implementation date of March 1, 2020. While this date would allow the Department to begin offering the reduced fee Conservation Patron license at the start of a new license year along with the other disabled veteran products, it does not allow much time to develop communication materials, train staff and inform disabled veterans of this new Conservation Patron license opportunity. A delayed implementation date of March 1, 2021 would allow for a longer implementation timeline and provide an opportunity for the Department to investigate a process with WDVA or CVSOs to verify veteran eligibility without requiring the veteran to present sensitive documents in person to sales staff.

I hope you find this information helpful as you consider AB 79. On behalf of the Bureau of Customer and Outreach Services, I would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



FULFILLING OUR PROMISES
TO THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED

Department of Wisconsin

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
MICHAEL HERT
DAV COMMANDER
DEPARTMENT OF WISCONSIN
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON SPORTING HERITAGE
WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY
JANUARY 30, 2020**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at this Public Hearing of the Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage on Assembly Bill 79 (AB 79) Relating to: *issuance of conservation licenses to certain veterans*.

DAV is a non-profit veterans service organization comprised of more than one million wartime service-disabled veterans that is dedicated to a single purpose: empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. In Wisconsin, we have nearly 15,000 members.

DAV was founded in 1920, congressionally chartered in 1932, and January 2020 is the start of our Centennial year celebration. For DAV this is a Century of Service to Veterans. We look forward to serving veterans for the next 100 years.

AB 79 requires that a veteran who is a state resident be issued a Conservation Patron license at a lower fee of \$65 than the regular license fee of \$165 if he or she produces evidence showing that he or she has a service-connected disability rating of 50 percent or greater, as determined by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), or is receiving disability benefits from the VA due to Individual Unemployability based on his or her education and skills as well as his or her medical condition.

DAV membership consists of wounded, injured and ill veterans. Currently, our members who have been combat wounded and have been awarded a Purple Heart receive a substantial reduction in purchasing a Conservation Patron license.

Our members who are service-connected injured or became ill while on active duty do not. In the past, we have been contacted by those members who fall into the latter category on a possible reduction for them.

Thank you, Chairman Stafsholt for holding a hearing on this bill.

Thank you, Rep. Horlacher, Rep. Edming, Rep. Milroy, Rep. Mursau, Rep. Skowronski, Rep. Tittl, and Rep. Tusler for cosponsoring this bill. Your sponsorship is greatly appreciated by DAV Wisconsin, particularly by our members who will be eligible for the \$100 discount.

Pursuant to DAV National Resolution No. 202¹, DAV Wisconsin supports AB 79. This concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Committee Members may have.

¹ Resolution 202, *Support the adoption of programs and legislation to reduce barriers to employment, education and full use and access to other benefits earned through service in the military* passed at DAV National Convention held in Orlando, Florida on August 6, 2019.