

## **ROBERT L. COWLES**

Wisconsin State Senator  
2nd Senate District

### **Testimony on 2019 Senate Bill 85**

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy – April 17, 2019

Thank you, committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2019 Senate Bill 85. 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. 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.

Senate Bill 85 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 Senate Bill 85, 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 Senate Bill 85 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 are drafting a simple amendment to delay the implementation date of this legislation until the start of the next licensing season on March 1, 2020. 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.



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April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Chairman Cowles and Natural Resources and Energy Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a Public Hearing on SB 85 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 issue.

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.

SB 85 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.

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## Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

### 2019 Senate Bill 85

#### *Issuance of conservation patron licenses to certain veterans with disabilities*

April 17, 2019

Good morning Chairman Cowles 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 Senate Bill 85, which creates a reduced fee conservation patron license for certain resident disabled veterans.

SB 85 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) to establish a method by which the department could verify veterans' current disability rating electronically, rather than requiring veterans to locate and 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 reduce fee Conservation Patron license without department staff administratively voiding and refunding the current approval.

We are currently working with the bill authors on a delayed implementation date of March 1, 2020 for this proposal. This would be preferred as it would allow the department to begin offering the reduced fee

Conservation Patron license at the start of a new license year (March 1) along with the other disabled veteran products, which would help to reduce the potential confusion for disabled veterans looking for the reduced fee Conservation Patron license and decrease department costs related to processing refunds. A delayed implementation date would also provide an opportunity for the department to develop a process with WDVA to verify veteran eligibility without requiring the veteran present sensitive documents in person to sales staff.

I hope you find this information helpful as you consider SB 85. I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding SB 85.



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## **Department of Wisconsin**

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD  
AL LABELLE  
DAV WISCONSIN BENEFITS PROTECTION TEAM LEADER  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENERGY  
WISCONSIN STATE SENATE  
APRIL 17, 2019**

Chairman Cowles, Ranking Member Miller and Members of the Committee:

Good morning! Thank you for allowing DAV (Disabled American Veterans) this opportunity to present our view on Senate Bill 85 (SB 85) Relating to: *issuance of conservation licenses to certain veterans.*

As you may know, DAV is a non-profit veterans service organization (VSO) comprised of over 1 million wartime service-disabled veterans, nationwide. In Wisconsin, we have nearly 15,000 members. DAV was founded in 1920 and congressionally chartered in 1932.

Each year, DAV helps more than 1 million veterans with Benefits, Transportation, Advocacy, Employment, and Volunteerism. Over Eighty percent (80%) of our total expenditures go to Service.

All our members were wounded, injured or became ill while in service to our nation, many of them severely. They have sacrificed much in defense of our country and state.

SB 85 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 Cowles and Vice Chairman Olson for introducing SB 85 and holding this Hearing on the bill. Your efforts are greatly appreciated by DAV Wisconsin, particularly by our members who will be eligible for the \$100 discount.

Pursuant to our Resolution 2018-47, DAV Wisconsin strongly supports SB 85 and urges this Committee and the legislature to pass the bill in an expeditious manner.

This concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Committee Members may have.