



# Jeff Mursau

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 36<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage  
AB 35- Modifying the Designation of a Free Fishing Weekend in January  
November 8, 2023

Chairperson Pronschinske and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 35, which modifies the designation of a free fishing weekend in January.

A number of years ago, we passed legislation establishing two free fishing weekends in Wisconsin. One in January and the other in June. These weekends offer an opportunity for anyone to experience the joy of fishing in Wisconsin. No license, no trout stamp or salmon stamp required!

This year the fishing weekends were held on January 21-22<sup>nd</sup> and June 3-4<sup>th</sup>.

When the bill was originally drafted in 2011 the intent was to have the weekend in January coincide with Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend. Aligning the January date with the holiday weekend would allow people to fish through Sunday. This may also result in additional hotel nights and more spending in local communities.

Unfortunately, the language in statute says, "3<sup>rd</sup> full weekend in January". In some years, including in 2023 and 2024, the third full weekend in January is after MLK weekend. This bill simply changes the language of the current statute to "the full weekend prior to the third Monday in January" to align with when we recognize MLK day.

The senate companion bill passed the Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage back in September. Last month, the full Senate passed the bill on a voice vote.

Once again, thank you for holding a public hearing on this important piece of legislation. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

STATE SENATOR

JESSE



JAMES

23<sup>RD</sup> DISTRICT

November 8th, 2023

Testimony of Senator James in favor of AB 35

Thank you, Chairman Pronschinske, and other members of the committee, for hearing this bill today.

AB35 provides a very simple fix to an error in legislation that has already been passed. Wisconsin has two free fishing weekends, one in January and another in June. These events allow Wisconsinites to enjoy fishing without the requirement of license or stamp.

The January free fishing weekend, established by the Legislature in 2011, was meant to coincide with Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. The reasoning behind this was to allow people to enjoy the outdoors while they already had time off of work and school in memory of the great civil rights hero.

Unfortunately, the statute language currently says, "3<sup>rd</sup> full weekend in January." In years such as 2023 and 2024, the 3<sup>rd</sup> full weekend in January is *after* the MLK weekend. This bill simply changes the language to "the full weekend prior to the third Monday in January" to make sure it aligns with MLK day.

Our free fishing weekends have allowed thousands of people to enjoy our natural resources. I thank you for your consideration of this simple correction. Let's pass this bill and make sure that all can continue to take advantage of this holiday.

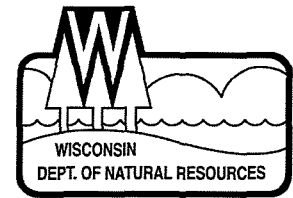
Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James

23<sup>rd</sup> Senate District

[Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov)



## Assembly Committee on Sporting Heritage

### *2023 Assembly Bill 35*

### *Modifying the Designation of a Free Fishing Weekend in January*

*November 8, 2023*

Good morning, Chair Pronschinske, and members of the Committee. My name is April Dombrowski, and I am the Recreational Safety and Outdoor Skills Section Chief for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Assembly Bill 35, related to the changes to the free fishing weekend in January.

Free Fishing Weekend aligns into the department's Learn to Fish programming, offering additional opportunities to gain participation in this outdoor activity. Under current law, free fishing weekend is the third weekend in January. Under this proposal, free fishing weekend would be the full weekend prior to the third Monday in January. As a result, in some years, like 2023, this change would result in the free fishing weekend occurring a week earlier in January than under the current law. However, this proposal would also establish a consistent date aligned with the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Ice conditions can vary greatly from waterbody to waterbody for fishing in January and providing this free fishing opportunity on a later weekend could provide more time for ice to strengthen, providing better ice conditions and opportunity for ice anglers. This is only noted in years when the free fishing weekend would occur earlier (2 of the next 10 years, 2024 and 2029) and is highly dependent on annual variability in weather conditions.

It's additionally important to note that certain organizations are already familiar with the current rule language and plan events around those dates; this change would require them to adjust venues around potential new dates in the future.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Chairman Pronchinske and committee members,

**I respectfully request the committee make this simple fix to help our R3 community while simultaneously remembering our late and dearly missed Assembly colleague Randy Thorson.**

In 2011, Majority Leader Suder and Representative Steineke welcomed suggestions from then-committee chairman Mursau to help amend and improve what would become the Sporting Heritage bill 2011 Act 168. The bill encompassed several provisions designed to recruit, reactivate, and retain (R3) resident and nonresident hunters, anglers, and trappers in Wisconsin.

Among the provisions of the original bill, Representative Steineke included a free winter fishing weekend in addition to the required summer free fishing weekend. As committee clerk and research assistant to Representative Mursau, I was inspired by Randy Thorson as he traveled to Boulder Junction every Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday to spend time with his family ice fishing.

Randy Thorson worked for Representatives Joe Handrick (Minocqua), Mike Powers (Albany), Gregg Underheim (Oshkosh), Don Friske (Merrill), Dan Meyer (Eagle River), and Scott Krug (Wisconsin Rapids) from the late 1990s until the late 2010s.

While Randy and his family undoubtedly purchased fishing licenses to recreate all year long, it is well known that bringing friends and family ice-fishing during our long dark winters can help recruit new anglers to try a different kind of fishing on the ice instead of on shore or in a boat. Free fishing weekends are designed to recruit and reactivate anglers.

There are a significant number of public and private sector workers who can, do, and could enjoy a full weekend fishing while spending their discretionary income at Wisconsin bait & tackle shops, gas stations, grocery stores, lodging facilities, and dining establishments regardless of if they are fishing near home or at a Wisconsin destination.

For traveling anglers, when they know they can fish for free all day on Sunday, a Monday departure is very attractive to make the most of their destination and their time on the ice. While they are doing so, they can leave a few more discretionary dollars among the many small businesses across Wisconsin that cater to their traveling needs.

Unfortunately, the 2011 general drafting instructions, enclosed with this testimony, provided to LRB were not translated in a way that guarantees free-fishing weekend lands on MLK weekend every year. The drafter put in language referring to the "3rd full weekend in January."

The words "3rd full weekend" unknowingly untied it and statutorily removed DNR's ability to re-designate it MLK weekend, which is tied to the 3rd Monday in January. Sometimes the third full weekend occurs after MLK Day. They did not match up in 2017, 2018, 2023, and won't match up in 2024, 2029, 2034, or 2035.

Resetting the free fishing weekend will make planning and promotions by the Departments of Tourism and Natural Resources more consistent and effective if everyone can always count on free-fishing weekend occurs on MLK weekend. Not many bills are as simple as the authors and proponents make them to be. This one is.

Respectfully,  
Tim Gary  
Middleton, Wisconsin

**Kite, Robin**

---

**From:** Fladeboe, David  
**Sent:** Friday, October 14, 2011 3:31 PM  
**To:** Kite, Robin  
**Cc:** Hilgemann, Luke; Bates, Katherine  
**Subject:** Amendment for AB 311

Robin,

Following up the public hearing on AB 311, the Sporting Heritage Bill, we have a few items we would like made into a sub amendment. An exec session hasn't been scheduled yet for it but is likely to happen next week.

- 1) In the requirement that schools offer a ½ credit for hunters ed, we would like to change the shall to a may. Make it optional for school districts to offer the credit.
- 2) Add fishing licenses to the reduced fee structure.
- 3) Change the effective date for the reduced price licenses to March 1, 2012, it is currently set for 2011 in the bill
- 4) In the language for half priced licenses for out of state hunters, add language that the price will be rounded up to the nearest dollar. The DNR was concerned that they may have to charge fractions of pennies for licenses.
- 5) Remove the Departments rule making authority in section 6 of the bill - *No - per Luke*
- 6) Move the winter free fishing weekend to the third weekend in January so it lines up with Martin Luther King Jr day (holiday weekend)
- 7) The January free fishing weekend appears to be limited to ice fishing. Allow open water fishing as well (some rivers are still open in January)
- 8) For the provision requiring a unanimous vote by the Natural Resources Board to approve stewardship lands not open to hunting, fishing or trapping, change it to a 2/3rds vote
- 9) Have the council being created provide a report the Governor as well as the legislature.

There may be a few other points coming but I wanted to get you the bulk of the amendment. I will send you any other instructions once I get them.

Thank you.

**David Fladeboe**  
Office of Majority Leader  
Rep. Scott Suder  
608-266-2401  
608-267-0280  
888-534-0069

*Any stewardship land*