



RACHAEL A. CABRAL-GUEVARA

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 55TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business, and Rural Issues

Representative Rachael Cabral-Guevara

July 21st, 2021

Hello, Chairman Stafsholt and members of the committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on AB 276/SB 298, an important bill that provides retail establishments which sell only pre-packaged food items an exemption from rules prohibiting dogs and cats on their premises.

Many hardware and multi-purpose establishments across the state have a customer base which owns animals for various purposes, including hunting. Under current law, service dogs are permitted on those premises, but this bill would allow a broader group of individuals to have their animals accompany them while in the store.

One real world company this would impact is Fleet Farm, which currently operates 47 stores in the Midwest, including 22 stores in Wisconsin. All of their stores sell pre-packaged foods and some carry limited frozen and refrigerated food products behind closed-door coolers. Under this bill, upon passage, Fleet Farm is seeking to host pet vaccination days and other public functions in conjunction with local humane societies. This proposal creates a narrow exemption from rules prohibiting dogs on the premises of retail establishments which only sell these pre-packaged food items. All of the other laws and rules regulating the sale of food items would still apply to these stores.

Thank you again for your time. I am hopeful you are able to support this bi-partisan piece of legislation.

Wisconsin State Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business, and Rural Issues
Frank Steeves – Fleet Farm Group LLC.
July 21, 2021

Good Afternoon. Mr. Chairman, Committee Members.

My name is Frank Steeves. I am Executive Vice President of Fleet Farm Group, which owns and operates retail stores in rural areas across Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota. As Governor Evers pointed out in his public statements at the beginning of the COVID crisis, Fleet Farm is an Essential Business in our state. In some places it is the only reliable source of day-to-day products for agriculture and rural living.

I am also Fleet Farm's General Counsel, and manage human resources, real estate, and new store construction. This includes managing the process of selecting locations for new stores. I also help formulate Company policies, which means I am deeply involved in customer relations.

There is no single topic that causes more anguish and anger to our Wisconsin customers than have the Wisconsin laws impacting whether they can bring their dogs into our stores. Regularly we receive letters and calls demanding to know why, when they are able to bring their pets in other stores, dogs are not allowed in our stores.

Our customers have a hard time understanding, or believing us, when we tell them it is because a small amount of floor space – a fraction of what we dedicate to pets, tools, outdoor cooking, work ware, automotive, and farm – is used to sell pre-packaged snacks. What happens then is that the occasional customer will leave their pet in their car while they shop, thereby endangering their pet. What also happens is that we are prohibited from sponsoring store animal welfare programs, such as serving as a host for pet adoptions, and from providing the desperately needed veterinary services that many rural areas lack.

The issue is that Wisconsin law currently prohibits dogs from the premises of all food establishments. Unlike in other states, in Wisconsin "Food Establishment" is defined broadly. Any store that sells any food, of any type, in any amount, is a "Food Establishment." On one end of the spectrum – where grocery stores and restaurants reside, the law makes sense. But it makes no sense in hardware, sporting goods, and Farm/Ag stores, which may sell some prepackaged snacks. Wisconsin law does not differentiate; and in this regard, Wisconsin law is at odds with the "model" Food code issued by the FDA.

This bill that Fleet Farm supports, and if letters and calls we get are any guide, is supported by the great majority of our customers, will bring Wisconsin's law in line with aspects of the Food Code, and with common sense. The bill would allow dogs on the premises of retail stores that only sell food that is pre-packaged. No other part of the Food Code is impacted, there would be no impact on rules concerning grocery stores and restaurants, and there is no impact on dog safety laws. We cannot imagine that, from a practical standpoint, this change would present a hazard to customers.

We ask you to join our customers, and support this Bill. It's been a tough year for everyone. With pets in almost 70%, and dogs in 40%, of Wisconsin households, with the companionship and comfort these pets provide, we think that this small change – one with no cost or budget impact – will make a lot of people and their pets happier and safer, and will also open a door for us and others to provide more adoption and veterinary services in rural areas.

Thanks for your time and attention.

Wisconsin State Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business, and Rural Issues
Mark A. Stelzl – Fleet Farm Group LLC
July 21, 2021

Good Afternoon. Mr. Chairman, Committee Members.

My name is Mark Stelzl. I am the Vice President of Farm and Pet Supplies for Fleet Farm Group, which owns and operates retail establishments in rural areas across Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota. I have been with Fleet Farm for almost 37 years working in the Farm category my entire career.

As the Vice President of the Farm and Pet Divisions for Fleet Farm I work with vendor partners that provide goods and services to our retail stores. Part of my job also includes having regular contact with rural lifestyle customers and pet owners who live near to and shop our stores.

One of the main concerns facing our customers is the fact that many areas of our state are underserved due to a lack of veterinaries in their immediate area, especially in the rural areas of our state. This lack of access to veterinary care for their animals weighs heavily on their minds, especially the small animal owners who do not have access to veterinary care for their pets during the normal Monday through Friday office hours of a veterinary clinic or the availability of a vet who lives in close proximity to their home. Also, as more and more vets choose to practice in larger metropolitan areas with greater pet populations, the potential for increased customer bases, and greater income factors, few aspiring vets choose to live in rural markets.

This is where Fleet Farm could provide a service that would greatly help our rural communities and these pet owners. In an effort to fulfil this need, I contacted a company by the name of PetIQ who has an established traveling veterinary service in many states that is designed specifically to provide these desperately needed services. This company employs licensed veterinaries and technicians that travel to retailers such as Fleet Farm and provides low cost well care services for pet owners and their pets who may not have convenient access to this type of care.

For over a year and extensively since July 2020 PetIQ and I worked out a detailed program that would provide well pet care clinics in all of our Wisconsin and Minnesota Fleet Farm stores at a minimum of once a month and would expand in each market based on consumer demand as needed. Our plans were to open these clinic in our stores beginning in February 2021.

However, after continued negotiations and open dialog, PetIQ withdrew their finalize contract with Fleet Farm on April 5, 2021 due to concerns about the current laws of Wisconsin as it applied to pets in our stores. Without the access for the clinics in our Wisconsin stores, PetIQ was unable to justify the securing of assets such as dedicated equipment and vans to travel to any of our stores as they need to protect their profitability. As a result of the withdrawal of the contract we are not able to move forward in providing a much needed service to our customers in any of our markets.

After this withdrawal I had another brief conversation with a member of leadership at Petco who was also willing to consider partnering with Fleet Farm for these type of clinics but also withdrew from consideration after reviewing the current Food codes of Wisconsin.

We ask you to join our customers and support this Bill. Pet owners, especially in our rural markets would be greatly served by having this type of clinic in our stores to ensure the wellbeing of their four legged family members. Thank you for your time and attention.