



MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony for SB 620

Senator Mary Felzkowski

Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues

October 19, 2021

Good morning Chairman Stafsholt and Committee Members,

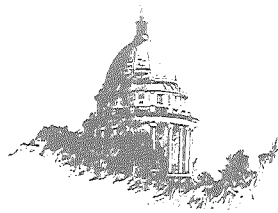
Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 620, which will require the DNR to authorize the hunting of Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin.

Early in the 20th century the Sandhill Crane nearly became extinct in the United States, and for this reason this bird was given a protected status in 1918 with the signing of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Sandhill Crane has since come back from the brink, and now it is estimated there are nearly 95,000 individuals that make up the Eastern Population, which includes the Cranes that are living in Wisconsin.

While it is great that these majestic birds have made a tremendous comeback over the last few decades, we have hit the point where regulated population management is necessary to ensure a proper equilibrium between rural Wisconsin citizens and this wildlife. Farmers over the last several years have experienced crop losses due to Sandhill Cranes; for instance according to a USDA report, Wildlife Services in Wisconsin received 265 complaints regarding Sandhill Crane damage to field crops in 2013, with reported damage estimated at \$1.9 million. Unfortunately, farmers who currently experience damage such as this are not eligible for wildlife damage reimbursements until a hunt is authorized by the DNR.

SB 620 lays out the basic groundwork for the DNR to authorize the hunting of Sandhill Cranes by individuals who possess appropriate approval from the department. While this bill requires that a hunting season be established, it will fall on the DNR and their wildlife experts to determine how many permits will be issued every year to ensure proper management of the population, as well as when and where such a hunt will take place in the state. If the Sandhill Crane population rises or falls, the department has the authorization to change the amount of issued hunting permits to compensate. This bill also requires hunters to pay a processing fee when they purchase a permit, and these funds will be used for developing, managing, preserving, restoring, and maintaining the Sandhill Crane population. A surcharge will also be charged per permit, and this revenue will go towards the wildlife damage program.

I am grateful to my Assembly author, Rep. Tittl and his staff for their hard work on this legislation. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.



PAUL TITTL

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 25TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues Senate Bill 620 October 19, 2021

First of all, I would like to thank you, Chairman Stafsholt and committee members, for allowing me to testify before you concerning Senate Bill 620 permitting the hunting of Sandhill cranes.

The Sandhill crane story in Wisconsin is a remarkable one, because at one time Sandhill cranes were very close to disappearing. In 1936 only 25 pair were estimated to be alive in Wisconsin. A year later, Aldo Leopold said the Sandhill crane's return to Wisconsin marshes was like "the ticking of a geological clock." The outlook for the cranes was not favorable. However, through the work of many people the number of cranes grew. As the number of cranes increased, a goal of 30,000 Sandhill cranes was presented as a huntable population.

Fast forward to 2021, and the Sandhill crane population is now estimated at more than 90,000. While that is a great achievement, it has also challenged many farmers. Sandhill cranes love to eat seedlings, and I have been told they can destroy a field in a single day. You will hear testimony today from farmers who have suffered as a result.

The current law enables farmers and others to shoot cranes if they get a USDA Fish and Wildlife permit, but they must either bury the cranes or leave them on the field. Although the bill allows hunting of Sandhill cranes, hunting is only one aspect of population control.

Another provision creates an education program to help hunters distinguish between Sandhill cranes and whooping cranes. The two are quite different, but we are taking special care to make sure people know the difference. I have also been told that no whooping cranes have been shot in other states by hunters who mistake them for Sandhill cranes.

Finally, the bill includes a \$2 surcharge for each hunting permit and a \$7.75 processing fee. The surcharge is to be used entirely to reimburse landowners and lessees for damage caused by the cranes. The processing fee is to be used to improve and manage the Sandhill crane population and administer the crane hunter education program. Under current law, because Sandhill cranes cannot be hunted, farmers are not able to receive reimbursement from the wildlife damage program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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Testimony in support of Crane Hunting Bill

Sixteen states including neighboring Minnesota have a crane hunting season.

This legislation is about proper management of the species as well. Currently, Wisconsin farmers are not eligible for crop damage payments attributed to cranes as they are not considered a game species in Wisconsin. This hunt will change that.

The USDA Wildlife Services Branch in Wisconsin received 265 complaints regarding sandhill crane damage to field crops in 2013, with reported damage estimated at \$1.9 million, according to a study from the agency.

Clearly, Wisconsin can and should open a management season for the sandhill crane.

Bill: 620, Relating to: hunting of sandhill cranes, wildlife damage abatement assistance and claim payments for damage caused by sandhill cranes, and making an appropriation.

By Senators Felzkowski, Ballweg, Jacque, Jagler, Stroebel and Testin; cosponsored by Representatives Tittl, Brandtjen, Callahan, Edming, James, Knodl, Magnafici, Milroy, Moses, Mursau, Penterman, Sortwell and Krug.

October 19, 2021

Testimony of: Margaret (Maggie) Honig, Resident of Fitchburg, WI

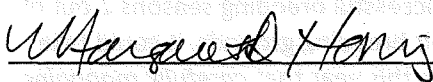
I believe it would be a mistake to have a Sandhill Crane hunt in Wisconsin, so I oppose this bill.

- 1) I support the positions of The International Crane Foundation and The Madison Audubon Society.**
- 2) Sandhills were once endangered because of hunting and habitat loss; this could happen again.** In the 1930's there were only an estimated 25 nesting pairs of Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin. It has taken many decades of work and several conservation measures, including legal protection, to bring them to healthy population numbers again. Hunting could jeopardize decades of work.
- 3) Sandhill cranes are unlike typical game birds in that their reproductive rate is slow, and the ratio of young to adult birds in the population is low.** I have no problem with the hunting of ducks, turkeys, and other game birds that typically lay many eggs and hatch many chicks per season. Their offspring develop relatively quickly and are sexually mature by the following spring. Cranes, on the other hand, lay on average only two eggs, and usually only one chick survives. That chick stays with its parents all the way through to the following spring migration, when the parents set up territory for their new nesting season. The chicks learn where to migrate, including where safe stopover areas are, from their parents, and the foods that Sandhills eat differ depending on where the birds are and what the season is. Sandhill Crane chicks in Wisconsin in the Fall, although they are the same size as their parents by the time they are ready to migrate and thus *look* like adults, are still dependent on their parents. ***Shooting parent cranes in Wisconsin prior to migration could mean death for the dependent chicks as well.***
- 4) A single hunt on the breeding grounds (anywhere in Wisconsin) could cause a decline in Sandhill Crane populations for multiple years to follow.** A single hunt on their breeding grounds can have population impacts for years to come, as we have seen in Minnesota in 2011. There, one hunt on the breeding grounds resulted in population declines for the following two years.
- 5) A hunt would have to be very carefully managed in order to avoid having the crane population plummet.** Sandhill Cranes take a long time to reach maturity, typically not having a successful nest (raise a chick) until they are four or five years old. Also, of the chicks that hatch, usually only one make it to fledgling stage (able to fly) every three years. That is, in the wild, any given fully mature (at least 4 or 5 year-olds) pair of cranes has unsuccessful breeding seasons 2 out of 3 years. For cranes to recover their losses after a hunt on their breeding grounds, it could take very long indeed. Added to this, there is evidence from earlier this year that *carefully managing*

a hunt is exceedingly difficult, especially when there are a lot of emotions around the creatures being hunted.

- 6) **Hunting Sandhill Cranes would likely increase the risk to the Endangered Whooping Cranes, which have even slower reproductive rates than Sandhills.** At least 1 in 10 Whooping Crane deaths since 2001 were because someone shot them. It is possible to mistake a Whooping Crane for a Sandhill if the light is low (as in early morning) or the weather makes it difficult to see the coloring, since the silhouettes of the two different cranes are nearly identical. Making it legal to shoot Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin will likely increase the risk of shooting deaths of Whooping Cranes.
- 7) **A Sandhill Crane hunt in Wisconsin will not solve the corn depredation issue.** Farmers already can get permits to kill cranes (1,000+ were killed under this provision in 2019) that are eating their corn. Shooting the cranes under these permits may only be a panacea for the farmers, since according to The International Crane Foundation, it's not affecting the overall amount of corn eaten by the cranes, and there isn't evidence that a hunt (for all its expense) will have any effect, either. Plus, a hunt would be carried out long after the corn has grown and the cranes are no longer causing damage.
- 8) **There is a solution for farmers that will not put the Sandhill Crane populations at risk of decline: corn can be treated to keep the cranes from eating it.** The International Crane Foundation is working to have a coating (Avipel) applied to the corn seeds at point of manufacture, so the farmers do not have to apply it themselves. This repellent would result in much less corn depredation by the cranes, and the state would not be spending the money on farmer compensation that they are spending now. Farmers would get their full crops, and fewer cranes would need to be shot.
- 9) **Cranes that are hunted are harder to watch up close.** I love Wisconsin; I was born in Milwaukee. One of the things I particularly enjoy is the ability to see Sandhills close up. I pay for the privilege to go to parks and other reserves to see them and other birds. It is amazing to see such exotic-looking creatures, dependent entirely on their own resourcefulness for survival, close up. I used to live in Texas where they have Sandhill hunts, and we have to work much harder to see them, sometimes only glimpsing them from great distances or as they fly high overhead. They are much more cautious around people in places where they are hunted, and I personally would find Wisconsin a little poorer if I could no longer see these birds up close. And in fact, Wisconsin might actually be poorer because birdwatchers contribute a lot of money to the Wisconsin economy, and there are trips designed specifically for crane watching.
- 10) Sources: My experiences, Cornell University, Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, The International Crane Foundation, National Audubon Society, Madison Audubon

Signed:



Margaret D Honig

- Wisconsin is home to the largest breeding population of the Eastern Sandhill Crane population. They breed also in Michigan, Ontario and Minnesota, with no regulated crane hunt in the Mississippi flyway.
- Management plan is a requirement by the USFWS to authorize any Mississippi Flyway States. Wisconsin has had a strong population of Sandhill cranes making a season justifiable by the federal government for over a decade.
- Eighteen states have crane seasons. Eastern population (anything east of the Mississippi River) seasons for Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee.
- In 2011 a bill to allow sandhill hunting was introduced but never made it out of committee.
- There are approximately 750,000 sandhill cranes in United States
- The eastern population is 90,000 and growing at 6 to 10% per year.
- Eastern population sandhills are Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee. They are considered the Atlantic Flyway versus the Mississippi Flyway.
- Wisconsin goose management plan and season are established. Yet we have no shortage of geese in WI. Given these facts, the management of a hunted Sandhill crane shouldn't be unusual to Wisconsin.
- Currently 18 other states and several Canadian Provinces allow a regulated sandhill hunt.
- An experimental sandhill crane harvest can happen when the population exceeds 30,000 cranes. 2020 Estimates that we are 3 times the population goal.
- Avapel on the corn seed can be used as a deterrent but that is an extra, at minimum, \$25 per bag at the farmer's expense. If this doesn't work the farmer can then get a permit to shoot the crane? Is the committee aware that the bird cannot be harvested but must be left in the field to rot?
- If we would have a regulated hunt in Wisconsin, it could be revenue for the State of Wisconsin.
- When did America's Dairy State turn into America's Bird State?

In addition:

These bullet points, are taken from a newspaper article from July 9, 2021 (page 27) of Wisconsin Outdoor News and Brillion News and the Appleton Post Crescent.

Examples of Crop Damage Caused by Sandhill Cranes
Exhibit accompanying oral testimony of Gary Weins, Hilbert





Wisconsin Corn Growers Association
N77W24707 Century Court
Lisbon, WI 53089
262-372-3289

October 19, 2021

My name is Nicole Wagner, I am the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Corn Growers Association and I am testifying on behalf of our members from across the state. The Wisconsin Corn Growers Association is a grassroots organization committed to increasing the profitability of corn production through sound policies, continued market development and strong involvement in the political process. In 2020, Wisconsin's 15,000 corn growers harvested over 516 million bushels on 2.97 million acres, an average of 174 bushels per acre. Growers received an average price of \$3.70 per bushel, which is **below** what it costs many farmers to plant, grow and harvest the crop.

Unfortunately, Mother Nature has not been on our side this fall and rain has kept corn growers out of the fields until the last few days. While our grower leaders would like to be here to tell you about their experiences with sandhill cranes they need to be in the combines, grain carts and semis being sure that they are able to harvest the 2021 crop in a timely fashion.

Our members from across the state incur damage from sandhill cranes every year. In areas where cranes are detrimental to crops farmers have used a multitude of different avian repellants on their seed in an effort to deter cranes from eating planted seed. These repellants give the crane a mild stomachache for a short period of time and are not effective in preventing field damage and economic loss. Currently, this is the only approved method of crane control today and in the opinion of most, these avian repellents are a waste of a farmers' money because these controls are mildly effective at best.

We have growers in Columbia and Waushara Counties that have seen one pair of cranes completely decimate an 80 acre field over the course of 5 days. That one issue resulted in the farmer needing to replant that field three weeks after the optimum planting window, resulting in lost revenue.



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Crane damage can occur over a long time, ranging from eating the seed right after planting until corn is roughly 14" tall, which could be up to six weeks in some parts of the state. In one acre a farmer plants 35,000 seeds. Crane damage can be as severe as 90% loss in fields with high crane populations, but for today's purposes we will assume the loss is 30%, or 10,500 seeds lost. Each corn seed is worth approximately four-tenths of a cent per seed, or \$42 an acre in lost seed cost. The potential yield loss with the lower plant population is 52 bushels/acre of lost yield multiplied by the current price of \$4.80 per bushel equals \$250 per acre of yield loss. When added to the lost seed cost of \$42 equals you are \$292 per acre in lost revenue. When a farmer is investing \$800-\$1,000/acre to grow a crop they cannot afford that much risk of income loss.

In Jefferson County, growers are seeing crop circles form in the fields from where the crane family units were feeding in spring. Growers in this area can spend up to \$20,000 a year on avian repellants each year; repellents that are getting less effective each year.

In Waupaca County, seed companies have been unable to complete data collection on new hybrids due to crane damage. The damage at this location was not only in spring but throughout the growing season.

Corn growers are simply asking for another tool to prevent damage to their fields. Thank you for your time today.



WISCONSIN
SOCIETY *for*
ORNITHOLOGY

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (WSO), a state-wide organization with over 1,100 members whose mission is to promote the study, enjoyment, and conservation of Wisconsin's birds, opposes Senate Bill 620.

Sandhill cranes are magnificent birds, beloved by residents of Wisconsin and tourists alike. Their recovery from near extinction was a long and arduous process, requiring collaboration between researchers, conservation organizations, and wildlife managers. These interested parties, along with the citizens of Wisconsin, deserve an opportunity to gather the facts and the science in response to Senate Bill 620. Instead, what we have here is a piece of legislation that is being fast-tracked through the assembly with scant opportunity for comment by the conservation community. A decision to hunt Sandhill Cranes, especially in this bird's breeding and staging area, requires careful consideration, not quick action.

Our organization was formed in 1939 by ornithologists and amateur birdwatchers alike. The WSO's logo and flagship publication feature the image and name of the Passenger Pigeon – a game bird hunted to extinction during the last century. Our logo is a call to protect other bird species from extinction. The growth of the WSO parallels the recovery of Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin. At the time this organization started, only 25 breeding pairs of Sandhill Cranes could be found in our state. It has taken nearly a century to rebuild their population to sustainable levels. The WSO is concerned that a Sandhill Crane hunt will mean a reversal of the incredible gains that have been achieved over decades of concerted effort.

The WSO understands that with the increase in the Sandhill Crane's numbers has come an increase in crop damage for Wisconsin's corn growers because cranes can feed on newly planted corn. But hunting cranes in the fall is not the solution to this problem. In the late summer and early fall, Sandhill Cranes from the Eastern Migratory flyway – which includes Michigan, Minnesota, Southern Ontario, and Quebec – leave their breeding territories and gather at staging areas in Wisconsin before flying south. A fall hunt of these migrating birds may have little to no effect on the cranes that feed on farmers' fields in the spring, but it may pose a significant risk of overharvesting the Eastern population.

This risk is exacerbated by the slow reproduction rate of Sandhill Cranes. Unlike other game species, Sandhill Cranes must reach 4-5 years of age before they nest. They lay only two eggs a year and typically only one of those hatchlings successfully fledges and survives for more than three years. Senate Bill 620 would be the first authorization of hunting Sandhill Cranes on their breeding ground. Such a hunt could lead to a sharp decline in the population of this slow-to-rebound bird.

Finally, the WSO is deeply concerned by the potential confusion of Sandhill Cranes with the endangered Whooping Crane. At last count, there were only 80 Whooping Cranes in the Eastern Migratory flyway population. Since the establishment of this population, at least 1 in 10 deaths was caused by shooting. Assurances and training aside, accidents do happen. In Wisconsin, we have seen hunters shooting elk that are mistaken for deer, severely hampering elk conservation efforts. We cannot let this happen to the Whooping Cranes.

For all these reasons, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology opposes Senate Bill 620.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.



International Crane Foundation

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Testimony of the International Crane Foundation for Public Hearing Senate Bill 620 October 19, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairman Stafsholt and members of the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the International Crane Foundation Board of Directors, staff, and our 9,500 members regarding Senate Bill 620, related to hunting Sandhill Cranes.

The International Crane Foundation (ICF) works worldwide for the conservation of cranes and the wetlands, grasslands, and agricultural lands on which they depend. Here in Wisconsin, ICF is a trusted source of information on Sandhill Cranes and their conservation and management. Through more than 30 years of research on Sandhill Cranes, and hosting of the Annual Midwest Crane Count, ICF has a unique database and understanding of Sandhill Cranes. We share this knowledge through our website and direct discussion with stakeholders concerned about the hunt decision or any other conservation issue involving Sandhill Cranes. We have participated in valuable discussions about crop depredation and the proposed Sandhill Crane hunt with Representatives Tittl and Dallman, our state and assembly representatives, other stakeholder organizations, as well as our partners and members.

The International Crane Foundation is opposed to Senate Bill 620 for ecological, agricultural, economic, and cultural reasons that far outweigh the value of a limited recreational hunt. We hope you will please consider the following information:

1. Hunting is not a solution for crop damage caused by Sandhill Cranes, but solutions are available.

- Crop damage by cranes is a real problem but there is no sustainable level of hunting of Sandhill Cranes that will solve this problem. Recreational waterfowl hunting is limited to late summer or fall, but crop damage from cranes occurs primarily in the spring when the cranes feed on the germinating corn seeds after planting.
- ICF helped develop an effective chemical deterrent (Avipel) that offers a much more effective alternative for reducing crop damage than a limited crane hunt.
- Farmers need support to address the added expense and inconvenience of applying Avipel. Alternative, more sustainable solutions for farmers include ensuring that all corn seed is treated at the point of manufacture with Avipel or other deterrents to cranes and other wildlife that may prey on germinating corn or seeds. Such availability would very substantially reduce the cost of deterrents per acre and the inconvenience of applying deterrents on the farm.
- We are committed to working with farmers, seed producers, legislators, and all others to solve this problem.

2. The financial cost of a crane hunt would outweigh the financial benefit to most farmers and the State of Wisconsin.

- An approved hunting season is necessary for farmers to qualify for claims under the statewide Wildlife Damage Abatement and Claims Program. However, a Sandhill Crane hunt would generate a low level of permit revenue, administrative costs would increase for enrolling producers in the program, providing abatement assistance, conducting crop appraisals, and processing damage claims; and program costs would increase for the purchase of damage prevention tools/supplies that are required.

3. Sandhill Cranes do not have the biological character of a game species. If not very carefully managed, Sandhill Crane hunting will harm populations.

- Over the last 70 years Wisconsin's Sandhill Crane population has recovered remarkably from very low numbers, but Sandhill Crane pairs reproduce very slowly. Most pairs do not successfully nest until 4-5 years of age, lay only two eggs, and typically only one hatchling survives to fledging once every three years. These characteristics contrast sharply with other game species that reproduce rapidly and recover quickly.
- Around the world, hunting poses a threat to other crane species due to their slow rate of reproduction. Hunting was a key factor in the near loss of Sandhill Cranes from the Midwest and near extinction of Whooping Cranes in North America.
- Although the eastern population of Sandhill Cranes is already hunted in several states, the proposed legislation would lead to the first authorized hunt on their core breeding grounds. There is significant risk that local breeding populations of Sandhill Cranes can be overharvested.

4. Accidental shooting of Whooping Cranes is a threat to their successful reintroduction into Wisconsin and the eastern US.

- ICF and partners have worked for 20 years to reintroduce the endangered Whooping Crane to Wisconsin and its flyway in the eastern United States. This small and young population is highly vulnerable to any deaths of adult breeding birds.
- Since the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership established the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes in 2001, at least one in 10 deaths was caused by shooting. This has clearly delayed the success of the reintroduction, and a Sandhill Crane hunt would likely increase the risk further.

5. Cranes evoke a strong cultural and spiritual connection for many people in Wisconsin and around the world.

- Most of the 9,500 members of the International Crane Foundation are strongly against the hunt due to the cultural and social values they place on this charismatic species. Our staff and members include avid waterfowl hunters and farmers who do not favor a Sandhill Crane hunt.
- Millions of dollars are invested each year in crane-related tourism and associated businesses across the United States, and this is a growing industry in Wisconsin.

Thank you for considering our concerns about the proposed Senate Bill 620. Please contact me if you would like discuss this matter further with our staff, or visit our website: <https://savingcranes.org/sandhill-cranes-crop-depredation-hunting-wisconsin>

Sincerely yours,



Hearing on Sandhill Crane Hunting Bill

The solution to crane depredation of farmers' crops is not hunting. That won't work as it is not designating which cranes are eating farmers' crops. Farmers currently are allowed to shoot cranes that they catch eating their Spring plantings.

The solution is massively increasing the use of Avipel on the corn seed. The cranes won't want to eat the seed. Avipel needs to be made much cheaper and it needs to be applied to the seed when the farmer buys it.

Hunting sandhill cranes would massively devastate the population. Remember that the great conservationist Aldo Leopold worried about their extinction. Hunting would hasten that as cranes are so slow to mature for breeding, being 4-5 years or more old. Likewise, they only produce 2 chicks a year with only one if not none surviving. Allowing a hunt would be the first authorization to kill cranes on their core breeding grounds. When a hunt was allowed in northwest Minnesota, a measurable population decrease of sandhill cranes occurred. Likewise, there is much more danger to the whooping crane being killed by hunters misidentifying them and whooping cranes are still critically endangered despite a long program of work to bring them back by many organizations.

It has been one of the great pleasures of my life to be a volunteer naturalist for the past 13 years at ICF. One of the best kind of tours has been with school age children where we can celebrate the vision of 2 college kids, George Archibald and Ron Sauey, to save cranes and tell the kids that they too should have a vision for making the world a better place.

Cranes are incredible birds, their calls, their dancing, their being such an old species of birds going back to the time of the dinosaurs.

We can save cranes and make the farmers safe from deprecation of their crops without a hunting season.

Thank you,

Susanna Bradley

5538 Century Ave. #4

Middleton, Wisconsin 53562

Wilfert Farms

Quality Home Grown
VEGETABLES

October 19, 2021

To: Wisconsin State Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business, and Rural Issues

From: Kelly Wilfert – Wilfert Farms LLC

Re: **Support 2021 Senate Bill 620, Relating to Hunting of Sandhill Cranes**

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

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business, and Rural Issues. My name is Kelly Wilfert, and I thank you on behalf of my family and our farm for the opportunity to provide testimony today in favor of Senate Bill 620.

Together with my parents, Dave and Terri Wilfert, brother Ryan, his wife Kelsey, and their nine-month-old son Vincent, I help run Wilfert Farms LLC in Two Rivers, Wisconsin. My brother and I are the fifth generation to farm our land, some of which has been in the family since the 1800s. At Wilfert Farms, we currently have three main divisions: fresh market fruits and vegetables, processing vegetables, and grains and oilseeds.

My parents and brother work full time on the farm, with three Bachelors of Science in Economics, Marketing and Dairy Science, a Farm and Industry Short Course Certificate in Foundations of Farm & Agribusiness Management, and a Farm and Industry Short Course Certificate in Management of Crops and Soils amongst them. My sister-in-law works part time as a Registered Nurse and part time on the farm, and I use my Bachelor of Science in Agriculture and Applied Economics and Life Sciences Communication and my Juris Doctorate to work full time as an attorney, helping on the farm on evenings and weekends.

Twenty thousand dollars. That's approximately how much quantifiable damage we have each year from wildlife, including sandhill cranes and deer.

In the last few years, the sandhill crane population has grown out of control, and they prey on our livelihood – eating the seeds of corn and soybeans as other farmers will likely tell you, but also the green beans and vegetable crops which Wisconsin is a national leader in producing. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, Wisconsin currently ranks first in the production of snap beans – or green beans – a key point for the rest of my testimony.

In 2020, in one 25-acre field alone, we suffered a loss of approximately \$8,000 to \$9,000 of product to sandhill cranes. In that 25-acre field of green beans, sandhill cranes ate over 50 percent of the seed. How do we know? In three consecutive days, we counted between 50 and 60 sandhill cranes at a time in that 25-acre field, pecking out seed. Thanks to precision agricultural technology, we know exactly how many seeds are planted in an exact space. In a normal 3-foot section of a green bean row, we would have about 19 seeds. When our agronomist of over 40 years came to review the field, over half the seeds were gone. However, when we attempted to obtain damage permits for sandhill cranes through the current process, we were unable to do so as the local official noted there were no peck holes from the sandhill cranes – a

consequence of a recent rain – and therefore no “proof” – other than the massive flock in the field and the missing seed. Looking for peck holes is an inconsistent measure – experts ought to be looking for missing seed – an issue which a hunting season for sandhill cranes would solve.

Luckily, this field was part of our processing vegetable division – where green beans are worth about 10 cents per pound. In our fresh vegetable division, green beans are not 10 cent beans being sold to the canning company but \$2.00 beans that would have been sold retail at our on-farm store.

Size and timing of the plantings – dictated by market demand for the fresh vegetable division and by the canning company for the processing division – also impacts the level of damage. In Wisconsin, green beans for canning are planted anywhere from mid-May to late-July, depending on the processor’s schedule. If a green bean field is planted at the same time as corn and soybeans for grain, the green beans are not the only buffet open for dining for the cranes, and damage will be spread out amongst our fields and our neighbors’ fields.

However, in our fresh vegetable division, we plant more than once per year. We plant peas in the pod 20 to 24 times per year, sweet corn 12 to 14 times per year, and green beans 12 to 14 times per year. These plantings are anywhere from a quarter of an acre to an acre in size. With these crops, sandhill cranes are our main issue. Many of our seeds go into the ground long after the major corn and soybean crops are green and standing, leaving our seeds as the small, primary meal source for sandhill cranes. If the flock of 50 to 60 birds destroyed half of 25 acres in early 2020, just imagine the damage when they converged on plantings which were 96 percent smaller.

Because we are planting throughout the season, we are a prime target for this type of bird damage. Because the fresh market plantings are not as large as the canning crop, if we finish planting and a flock of sandhill cranes comes in, they can clear the field in no time flat.

Finally, I want to note that we are not a hunting family. We don’t hunt deer or turkeys or rabbits or birds. We don’t fish. Hunting is not recreational for us, and when we have significant wildlife damage and are granted permits, we bring in a minimal number of skilled hunters to assist us. To be honest, we aren’t interested in constantly playing camp director – however, we no longer have a choice. If we don’t do something about the significant damage the sandhill cranes are causing, we’ll be out of business before long.

Our farm also suffers significant damage to our carrots and other crops from whitetail deer, and we appreciate the efforts of the legislature and the Department of Natural Resources to work with farmers in abating wildlife damage. Our family is well acquainted and have worked extensively with Jeff Pritzl who was appointed this year as the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Deer Program Specialist from his history as a DNR wildlife biologist and supervisor for the Northeast region where we live and farm and appreciate his efforts.

We thank the authors and cosponsors of this important bill, especially our state senator, Andre Jacque, and urge you to support the development of a hunting season to control the growth of the sandhill crane population and the damage they cause to Wisconsin agriculture, including our strong processing vegetable industry, and farmers like my family.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. My father was unable to be here today as we are harvesting carrots and corn at home but would also be happy to speak with committee members individually about our concerns. You can also reach out to our family at sales@wilfertfarms.com.

October 11, 2021

Senator Mary Felzkowski
Representative Paul Tittl
(Sent via e-mail on 10/11/2021)

Subject: Legislation on potential Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin (LRB-4935/1)

This is regarding the Sandhill Crane Hunting Bill LRB-4935-1 that you are co-sponsoring. Debate about a Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin has been ongoing for many years. Now is the time for legislators to take a leadership role in this debate by initiating a comprehensive and transparent decision-making process that seeks and considers input from Wisconsin citizens.

An overarching concern in authorizing a Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin is that no specific evaluation of potential effects has been done to address longstanding questions such as population estimate reliability, potential overharvest of local breeding populations, crop damage, and potential conflicts with Wisconsin's Whooping crane reintroduction program being administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and DNR under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Wisconsin is fortunate to have world renowned crane expertise through the International Crane Foundation (ICF). With over 30 years of research on Sandhill cranes, and hosting the annual Midwest crane count, the ICF has a unique database and understanding of Sandhill cranes. In their recent article at <https://savingcranes.org/sandhill-cranes-crop-depredation-hunting-wisconsin/> the ICF presented these key observations and concerns about a Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin:

- Hunting is not a solution for crop damage – A fall Sandhill crane hunting season would not solve the problem of crane damage to spring corn crops. Eligible farmers claiming crop damage, are already permitted to shoot Sandhill cranes on their farms under a federal permit. The ICF played a lead role in developing Avipel, a chemical deterrent added to seed corn to help prevent crop damage.
- A Sandhill crane hunt needs careful management – this includes protecting important breeding habitat, better data on the number and location of migratory birds relative to local breeding birds in the state, and other factors potentially affecting the population (*I would add climate change*).
- A Sandhill crane hunt increases the risk of accidental Whooping crane shootings – There's an ongoing program (20-year effort) in Wisconsin to reintroduce the endangered Whooping crane to Wisconsin and its flyway in the eastern United States. This small and young population is highly vulnerable to any deaths of adult breeding birds.

I fully support the ICF's views and concerns, and would add that the value of crane populations to Wisconsin's tourism economy should not be underestimated when compared to any economic gains from a hunting season. The opportunity to view cranes in their natural habitat, particularly in core central Wisconsin breeding areas, is a huge draw for out of state visitors as well as Wisconsin residents who enjoy passive recreational opportunities. Further, Wisconsin's unique role in the Whooping crane reintroduction effort increases the state's tourism appeal. For example, several communities in the state host crane festivals and other events that feature cranes as a key attraction.

In addition to the currently proposed legislative authorization for DNR to develop a permit and fee structure for a Sandhill crane hunt, it is my understanding that two other key steps would be required prior to implementing a crane hunt: Initiation of the federal flyway coordination process to request approval of an experimental hunting season and harvest quota, and creation of an administrative rule by DNR.

As a retired environmental scientist with extensive experience in agency environmental compliance under the Wisconsin and National Environmental Policy Acts, it is my opinion that DNR would need to conduct a comprehensive environmental analysis under these acts prior to taking any such actions to advance a Sandhill crane hunt.

Specifically, the environmental analysis process would include the following:

Purpose and need: Clear definition about why a Sandhill crane hunt is being proposed would likely involve multiple factors such as population control, alleviating crop damage, and providing another recreational hunting opportunity. Any contributing factors would require a detailed explanation along with supporting data such as Sandhill crane population estimates, crop damage information, and the extent of support for additional recreational hunting.

Alternatives: A full range of alternatives for carrying out a Sandhill crane hunt would need to be evaluated including the extent to which each would address purpose and need factors. For example, there could be alternative times and durations for a hunting season. Information on the number of permits expected to be issued in a given year and the anticipated harvest quota would also need to be provided. The no action alternative would also be considered and discussed.

Impacts: A comprehensive comparison of the impacts for each alternative would provide the basis for selecting a recommended course of action. Quantifiable impacts would include an estimate of the hunting permit revenue generated for DNR, the number of Sandhill cranes expected to be harvested in any given year, effects on the overall population in the eastern flyway as well as local geographic populations, and the extent of any crop damage reduction. Socioeconomic impact factors would include the economic benefits of a Sandhill crane hunt compared to the economic benefits of tourism associated with Wisconsin's crane populations such as local festivals, birding, and other activities.

Perhaps most important, and unique to Wisconsin, is the need to evaluate potential conflicts with the federal program that's in place to establish a self-sustaining population of Whooping cranes in the eastern U.S. This re-introduction program is being administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act in cooperation with DNR and other partners including the International Crane Foundation. Since 2001, central Wisconsin, which also has the highest Sandhill crane population, has been the site for breeding, rearing, and releasing Whooping cranes into habitat shared with Sandhill cranes, including federal and state wildlife refuges. Due to overlapping ecology and habitat, physical similarities at times in their life cycles and other factors, a Sandhill crane hunt could adversely affect Whooping Cranes and conflict with the federal re-introduction program.

Public and agency input: The environmental analysis process also includes gathering input from other state and federal agencies, private entities, and citizens that would have an interest in the outcome of a Sandhill crane hunt decision.

It is recognized that other states in the Mississippi flyway (Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama) have authorized Sandhill crane hunts based on the 2010 management plan for the eastern population of Sandhill cranes prepared by an ad hoc committee of state and federal agencies, and the 2013 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service environmental assessment on proposed hunting regulations in the eastern population of the Mississippi flyway. While they can be a useful guide, these documents are outdated and do not provide the detail needed to make a decision on implementing a Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin.

In summary, no specific evaluation of the potential effects of a Sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin has been done to address longstanding concerns and questions such as population estimate reliability, potential overharvest of local breeding populations, crop damage, potential conflicts with the Whooping crane re-introduction program, and other beneficial or adverse effects. Using the environmental analysis process summarized above to evaluate the effects of a possible Sandhill crane hunt would result in a full disclosure and defensible decision document for DNR and the citizens of Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin legislature should support and help facilitate this comprehensive and transparent decision-making process.

Thank you for considering my input and recommendations. I would be happy to meet with you to answer any questions or to discuss my input in more detail.



Mary Ellen O'Brien
Environmental Scientist (retired)
4226 Waban Hill
Madison, WI 53711
(608) 271-8713
tem@tds.net

Copies to:

Governor Tony Evers
Preston Cole, DNR Secretary
Senator kelda Roys (my Senate District 26)
Representative Sheila Stubbs (my Assembly District 77)

DATE: October 19, 2021

TO: Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues

FROM: Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation
Jordan Lamb – jkl@dewittllp.com

RE: Support for Senate Bill 620, Establishing a hunting season for sandhill cranes

Thank you to Senator Felzkowski and Representative Tittl for drafting Senate Bill 620, legislation that will establish a hunting season for sandhill cranes in the state of Wisconsin.

The rush of the harvest buzz is upon us. Farmers are in full stride as they move equipment from field to field to harvest, hope for no equipment breakdowns, haul their crops to market and keep a watchful eye on the weather forecast. Our farmers would love to be here with you today, however, they have 70 degrees and dry weather on this beautiful October day, and that means you will likely find them in one of two places, a combine or a tractor cab. That being said, many of our member have stories to tell and took the time, during the busy harvest season to write down their accounts with you. Those Wisconsin Farm Bureau farmer testimonials are attached to this testimony for your review.

If our farmers were here today, they would tell you their stories about the sandhill cranes that they used to see in their farm fields 10 years ago. A breeding pair on the back 40 or a bachelor flock of 10-15 cranes passing through in the spring. How this occasional sighting of a sandhill crane just ten or so years ago has turned into a population of tens of thousands, with hundreds of cranes flying in enormous bachelor flocks, landing in freshly planted fields and plucking up corn kernel after corn kernel right down the row until there is no corn left.

They would tell you about the mitigation practices they use to try to scare the cranes away and over time how the birds become callused to those methods and come right back to poking holes in potatoes or plucking up fresh seedlings.

Farmers have spent countless hours trying to utilize mitigation practices in order deter cranes from damaging their crops and countless dollars purchasing seed coating materials such as Avipel to deter cranes from eating seeds and newly emerging seedlings.

As the sandhill crane population continues to grow and thrive without management, our farmers have no relief, and the financial damages continue to go uncompensated.

SB 620 establishes a process for management of the sandhill crane population by authorizing the Department of Natural Resources to issue permits for sandhill crane hunting areas throughout the state. Wisconsin Farm Bureau policy supports both the management and hunting season for sandhill cranes.



We appreciate that this bill allows for hunting, management, damage compensation and education for sandhill cranes in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation supports SB 620 and urges the Committee to vote to support this legislation.

Date: October 19, 2021

To: Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues

Re: Sandhill Crane Population Management

Good afternoon members of the Committee. I write to you today to ask for your help on controlling the sand hill crane population. We have a dairy farm in Kewaunee County WI. We operate approximately 1500 acres of land, growing 650 acres of corn, 700 of alfalfa and 150 acres of winter wheat.

Over the past 10 years the number of sandhill cranes has exploded in this area. We have encountered flocks of 40-60 birds at a time feeding on our fields. When scouting fields this past spring we found large areas where 95+ percent of the corn was missing. At first, we thought we had a problem with the planter, but after walking the area and looking into it, we could see the tracks from the cranes and noticed where they went along and pulled the young growing corn out of the ground to eat the seed. On a 74-acre field we lost approximately 5-7 acres to the cranes.

At a cost of \$550 per acre to grow corn, that adds up in a hurry. It's not just the cost that hurts, we count on every acre to supply feed for our herd of cows, so not only do we lose out on the crop, we have to buy it from someone else to replace it. The rest of that field averaged 21 ton per acre of silage, so to replace the roughly 120 ton cost us \$4200. All of our other fields received crop damage from the cranes also, but not to this extent. It is hard to quantify the loss on the other fields as the loss is more spread out on them. Each year the damage continues to be getting worse.

Please support a hunting season for sandhill cranes to manage the population and provide some relief for farmers like me.

Todd Augustian
Augustian Farms LLC
Forestville, WI

October 19, 2021

Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues

Comments on Sandhill Cranes and Agriculture

My name is David Mickelson and I am involved part-time in a 270 acre family farm growing corn, soybeans and winter wheat in Columbia county.

Part of our farm is next to wetland areas that tend to attract cranes in the spring. For the last 10 years or so, the number of cranes in our area has been increasing, from several to several hundred. Sandhill cranes have used our fields as a food source to varying degrees over the years. The primary damage is done by the cranes digging up and eating newly planted corn seeds. As the corn grew, you could visibly see a reduction in corn population, which results in lower yields. Initially, when the crane numbers were low, we tolerated some feeding by them. Later, as their numbers increased, the next tactic was scaring them from our fields to larger nearby fields, where their impact was spread over more acres and not noticed. We eventually had to use Avipel as a corn seed treatment on about half of our corn acres to deter them from eating the seeds. The goal is to drive them to alternative, non-crop food sources. While this has worked well for the last 5 years, the cost has risen from \$5 to \$8 per acre. With our relatively few acres it is imperative that we make the most of every acre. For the large farms surrounding us, the damage is seen as a cost of doing business, and less than the cost of treating large numbers of acres.

While a hunting season for sandhill cranes by farmers and landowners would act as a deterrent, I am not interested in opening our farm to crane hunting by out of state hunting groups that could potentially cause more problems than the cranes themselves. Care should be taken in developing regulations for hunting to primarily benefit affected farms. Any potential revenues should be 100% used for crop damage reimbursement and not for general purpose revenue.

Thank you for your attention.

David Mickelson

DeForest, WI

Senators, thank you for the opportunity to voice my opinion relative to an ethical and sustainable sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin. I am a conservationist and hunter. I am a resident of Ripon. As a volunteer with Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, I have collected data on sandhill cranes for the past 18 months.

Who has ultimate authority on Sandhill crane management and thus hunting? The USFWS In 2010, under the Obama Administration an ad-hoc committee comprised of State Migratory Bird specialists of the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways and also included 2 members of International Crane Foundation developed a management plan for the six recognized populations of SHC. The birds in WI are considered the Eastern Population or the EP. The EP plan in 2010 established the ability for specific states to request a 3 year experimental hunting season. We are here today to request WI legislators give authority to WDNR to establish a hunting season plan and request from the USFWS, Wisconsin to be allowed a 3 year experimental hunt. Since 2010, Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama have enacted the experimental hunt.

The USFWS has a specific 7 point format for that request. There is a limit to the total number of EP cranes to be allowed for harvest each year. There is a limit and a mathematical equation for limits set in each state. These limits are set each year. If the EP population should be negatively impacted, the following year the limits are reduced. There is virtually no chance for overharvest or reducing populations below the population goal set in 2010 of a minimum 30,000. In the fall of 2020, the EP population was roughly 95,000 birds, with the three year average around 94,000. Wisconsin has about 52% of the population stage in late October in primarily. That equals about 49,000 cranes staging in WI in late October. They are not dispersed very well. 80% of the cranes are staging in 6 counties, Burnett, Columbia, Dodge, Outagamie, Shawano and Wood Counties.

Important facts to know:

1. 2020 USFWS population estimates for entire United States all 6 recognized populations greater than 1,000,000! 900,000 are mid-continent population that has been hunted in 3 states since 1961. There are 17 states and 4 Canadian provinces currently allowed to hunt sandhill cranes.
2. There is no scientific reason for not supporting a hunt!!! Both Aldo Leopold and International Crane Foundation have stated this on their websites in the past 18 months.
3. Hunting was not the cause of near extinction of population 90 years ago. Uncontrolled, commercial hunting may have been a large factor. We are asking for an ethical and sustainable, controlled hunt.
4. Wasteful Waste - Approximately 1000 Wisconsin sandhill cranes are shot every Spring. They are not allowed to be eaten. They must be buried or burned in the field.
5. The ultimate authority on Sandhill crane populations in the United States has established highly controlled guidelines that Wisconsin must follow. This hunt is undeniably carefully managed. The Wisconsin hunter population is open to ideas to further ensure strong populations of sandhill cranes as we have a strongly vested interest. Maybe more so than any conservation group.
6. Avipel, while effective, is not a long term solution for crop damage. Farmers report the cost and clumsiness to work with the product are not worth the effort.

7. Whooping Crane accidental shootings are an unjustified concern! Wisconsin's whooping crane population has shrunk by 20% over the last three years. There have been no gun related deaths in Wisconsin. There have been 10 gun related deaths since 2001 in other parts of the country. I am not aware that any have been caused by a legal hunter. One of the 7 points in the USFWS request must be an educational process to ensure proper identification of the targeted species.

CONCLUSION

I read this quote on the Aldo Leopold website, "Aldo Leopold would be excited to know the sandhill crane has rebounded to a population level that allows us to have this discussion."

KIM SHADY

920 745 0880

kim14shady@gmail.com

Wisconsin State Assembly Public Hearing Testimony

10/19/21

I am here today as a concerned citizen of Wisconsin.

I have been a licensed mental health provider for nearly 15 years.

I regularly speak with people about the importance of practicing gratitude and being mindful of positive moments in our lives as humans.

This has been particularly true in the last 18 months as we have all endured the pandemic.

Sandhill cranes are beautiful, peaceful creatures who bring our community together.

I have been grateful for the many interactions that I have had with my neighbors, of varying gender, race and age, who share my love for our precious sandhill cranes.

Sandhill cranes maintain deep attachments with their mates and offspring.

I live across the street from a field where a pair of sandhill cranes regularly spend time together during the months that they are with us in Wisconsin.

A few weeks ago, one of the cranes landed in the field alone. It proceeded to call out for his mate for more than hour. He stood still as he waited for her. His calls became increasingly more urgent. I found myself wondering if his mate were somewhere injured or lost.

My heart melted as I eventually heard her calling in return. She circled him as she made her way down into the field for a landing. Finally reunited, our sandhill crane friends gracefully walked the field together in tranquil silence.

This experience filled me with gratitude. Caring for our sandhill cranes brings joy to my life every day, and I will never take my positive moments with them for granted. I know for a fact that I am not alone in this.

According to the International Crane Foundation, Wisconsin is considered a part of the core breeding grounds for sandhill cranes. Sandhill cranes mate for life and lay two eggs that incubate for about a month. Both parents take turns sitting on the eggs. Baby colts need both of their parents to survive and would be left vulnerable without them.

I vehemently oppose senate bill 620 which would allow for the hunting of sandhill cranes in Wisconsin. Simply put, the proposal is a violent disgrace.

Thank you for your time,

Kathryn O'Connell

(Middleton, WI)

Regarding damage by
wildfire cranes to
farmer fields,
grazing by deer,
the Canada goose, etc,
the purpose of this
bill does not have
legs. The farmer
is able to apply for
a permit to remove
animals under the
Moose and Deer
Act.