

ROBERT L. COWLES

Wisconsin State Senator, 2nd Senate District

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Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 207

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

April 13th, 2023

Thank you, Committee Members, for allowing me to testify on 2023 Senate Bill 207. This bill levels the playing field by expanding eligibility in the urban wildlife abatement grant program to more communities.

In the 1997-99 State Budget, a small grant program was created at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to help municipalities with some of their costs to control impacts from nuisance wildlife like raccoons and geese. However, the language to create the program was very broad, simply referring to eligible applicants as “urban communities.” The DNR, in the process of creating rules to administer this grant program, used an obscure statutory cross-reference in a Department of Transportation chapter to make the only eligible applicants those certain communities which were identified as “urban areas” by the Federal Highway Administration in 1989.

A lot has changed in those thirty years, including that communities which were not arbitrarily identified by the federal government as urban back then are now without a doubt urban communities. Yet, because of the broad statutory language and obscure and outdated administrative rules, dozens, if not hundreds of municipalities throughout Wisconsin are not eligible to compete for this limited grant funding. We learned of this issue when we were contacted by a Fox Valley community, the Village of Kimberly, which was unable to apply because they weren’t considered urban in 1989. Today, they have a sizable population of about 7,500 residents, beating the population numbers of some of the other communities which are eligible for this grant funding.

Senate Bill 207 corrects this long-standing problem by removing the statutory reference to “urban communities” and instead sets a requirement to qualify by population density. Using population density as the measure for qualification ensures that larger towns may be eligible along with their city and village counterparts. This grant program has only funded at about \$20,000 to \$25,000 per year in recent years, and applications are highly competitive. But the issue of program funding is separate from the issue of fairness in eligibility for the program.

By passing Senate Bill 207, we can fix that issue of fairness. This small change will create a better grant program and ensure that all communities which were likely once envisioned to be eligible are now in fact eligible and able to compete for these competitive funds to control the impacts of nuisance wildlife in their area.



RON TUSLER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 3rd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

**Testimony for Senate Bill 207
Public Hearing
Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Energy
April 13, 2023**

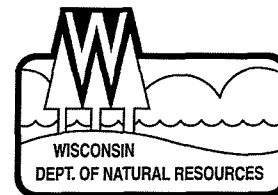
Chair Cowles and fellow members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy: thank you for hearing this bill today. The bill before you is Senate Bill 207 (SB 207), relating to eligibility for local wildlife control grants. This bill eliminates an outdated and undefined term to allow municipalities to apply for grants to cover the costs, up to \$5,000, for wildlife abatement or control projects and seeks to rectify a long-standing problem with the state's grant program for controlling nuisance wildlife.

The current grant program was created in the 1997-99 State Budget, with the intention of providing financial assistance to urban communities struggling with the effects of nuisance wildlife. However, due to the broad statutory language used in its creation, many municipalities have been unfairly excluded from this support. The problem lies in the fact that the Department of Natural Resources in creating its eligibility requirements referenced a 1989 Federal Highway Administration data to determine the definition of "urban." This definition has not been updated since, which means any community not classified as urban in 1989 is ineligible for this grant, regardless of their current population density or urban status today. This issue of exclusion has been the inability to effectively manage the nuisance wildlife in expanding communities which has resulted in property damage, increase of vehicle collisions, as well as, negative effects on local ecosystems.

Senate Bill 207 seeks to address this problem by amending the statutory language to remove reference to "urban communities" and instead requires population density to be used as the measure of eligibility. This change ensures that all communities with a significant population density are eligible for the grant program, regardless of whether or not they were classified as urban in 1989.

I strongly urge support for SB 207, which would rectify the long-standing problem of arbitrary exclusion of certain communities from the state's grant program for controlling nuisance wildlife. SB 207 will ensure that all communities with a significant population density are eligible for the grant. This change will create a fairer grant program, provide greater support for communities in need, and help manage the impact of nuisance wildlife in Wisconsin.

Thank you again, members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Energy for taking my testimony on SB 207. I look forward to your support and recommendation of passage of this bill.



Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

2023 Senate Bill 207 *Eligibility for Local Wildlife Control Grants* *April 13, 2023*

Good morning, Chair Cowles, and members of the Committee. My name is Brad Koele, and I am the Wildlife Damage Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Senate Bill 207, related to the eligibility for local wildlife control grants.

The Urban Wildlife Damage Abatement and Control Grant Program was created by the Wisconsin State Legislature in 1997. Under this program the department awards matching grants, up to \$5,000 per grant, with a total of \$25,000 available annually, to municipalities for the development of a deer or Canada goose population control plan or the implementation of a deer or Canada goose removal program. In recent years, six to ten municipalities apply for grant funding annually with between six and eight grants being awarded. Each year, the available grant funding is used up completely.

Senate Bill 207 (SB 207) proposes to increase the number of municipalities eligible for the grant. To determine grant eligibility the program currently utilizes a definition of "Urban Area" that was created by the Federal Highway Administration 1989. Under this definition, 128 municipalities in the state are defined as an "Urban Area" and are currently eligible. SB 207 proposes to update and expand the eligibility requirements to include any city, village, or town with a population density of 125 or more persons per square mile. Many communities have a need for this funding but are currently ineligible because of the outdated definitions that are being used.

This change would increase the number of municipalities that are eligible for the grant and could help with urban wildlife problems that communities are experiencing. That said, it should be acknowledged that funding is a limitation. Currently, only \$25,000 is allocated to the program annually. As mentioned above, the department already receives enough applications to fully utilize the funding, so while the number of municipalities eligible for the grant would increase under the bill, the department would still only be able to award between six and eight grants.

The department appreciates the efforts to expand the eligibility requirements and allow more municipalities to be eligible for wildlife control grants. There is an ongoing need for wildlife management efforts in urban areas and this will help more communities find resources to address their wildlife control problems.

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.