

TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

March 30, 2011

Regarding Assembly Bill 35: Culling of bass in a fishing tournament

**Testifying on Behalf of B.A.S.S., LLC: Noreen Clough, B.A.S.S. National
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Chairman Mursau, Representative Kleefish and others, thank you for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 35, a proposed change to allow the culling of bass in fishing tournaments.

I commend you, Mr. Kleefish, and all co-sponsors for taking on a legislative change that has for too long been the subject of controversy and contention between Wisconsin fishery managers and competitive bass tournament anglers.

As you might suspect, B.A.S.S. at the national level is very much in support of this proposal to allow culling. In fact, this is the second time in the last several years that I,

myself, have testified before your legislature on culling in bass tournaments. I am here to represent the more than 500,000 B.A.S.S. members nationwide, the 9000 B.A.S.S. members in Wisconsin, the 100 B.A.S.S. Elite Pro Anglers, and the hundreds of competitive anglers who fish the B.A.S.S. Open tournament trails.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' website, one-third of Wisconsin's citizens fish, representing some of the highest rates in the United States.

You have 14 million anglers that annually catch 88 million fish, keep 33 million of all kinds, and release the rest.

Licensed anglers pay for the privilege to fish. Those license fees go directly to support state fisheries management. The proceeds from excise taxes on fishing tackle and equipment, motorboat fuel, and import duties on recreational boats and fishing equipment are collected for sportfish restoration programs operating under the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. 777) administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service. These combined excise taxes and duties on the boating and fishing communities generate more than \$650 million annually and are apportioned back to the states as a critical funding pool to directly support a diverse set of important state and national recreational fishing and boating programs, including fisheries management, habitat conservation, recreational boating safety, vessel pump-out stations, water and boating access infrastructure programs, aquatic resource education programs, and angler and boater outreach. Based on the formula used - that is the number of licensed anglers and

land area - your state's Federal Aid apportionment for 2011 was the 5th largest of all 50 states: \$12,032,815.

This user pay-user benefit program is the cornerstone of fisheries management in America. Anglers therefore have a vested interest in not just fishing, but sound fisheries management. That tournament anglers in Wisconsin should take a disproportionate amount of regulatory restriction that is not biologically justifiable simply is not right.

There are two issues for you to consider as you weigh the pros and cons of removing the no-culling restriction: is there scientific biological evidence that culling seriously harms bass populations, and what are the economic benefits forgone if Wisconsin continues to prohibit culling for bass tournaments?

First the biological discussion, because that really should be the driving force in decision-making – how it affects overall fisheries management. In a 2006 study of “Tournament-Associated Mortality and the Effects of Culling in Wisconsin Black Bass Tournaments,” it was concluded that culling does not significantly increase mortality at tournaments. In fact, culling appeared to have a lesser impact on bass tournament mortality when compared to the impacts of water temperature and the presence of Largemouth Bass Virus (LMBV). Studies as early as 1991 have concluded that even though tournament-associated mortality rates have varied from 0 to as much as 98%, in general tournaments

have not been considered a major factor in reducing the size of fish populations since catch-and-release procedures were established (Schramm et al., 1991).

It is during these types of discussions that I like to remind folks that tournament anglers always fish within existing state regulations and bag limits -- bag limits that permit licensed anglers to keep and kill their fish, which indeed Wisconsin anglers do to 33 million fish.

Therefore, trying to use a biological justification that has not been scientifically proven in an attempt to resolve the more probable social issues of opposition to tournaments in general, and of the stated Wisconsin Administrative Code (101(d)) language that defines sportfishing as “a true amateur sport which combines the pleasures and skills of angling with wildlife and scenic enjoyment, contemplation and other subtle pleasures, not competition,” could be considered disingenuous at best. It also avoids the issue of regulating tournaments in logistical ways to minimize conflicts of tournament scheduling, the number of boats, methods to reduce ramp and parking crowding, etc.

The economic contributions of bass tournaments are substantial. For example, just recently because of the culling restriction, the decision was made to move the B.A.S.S. Federation Nation Northern Divisional (which includes anglers from 8 states and Italy) from Wisconsin to Iowa, at a loss of at least \$270,000 to your state.

The B.A.S.S. Director of Event Partnerships has told me that direct spending for B.A.S.S.'s Open tournaments results in \$700,000. When calculated for direct/indirect and media spending, the total increases to \$1.5 to 2 million dollars for Open tournaments and the prestigious Bassmaster Elite Series tournaments. Statistics from the Syracuse, NY, Convention and Visitors Bureau calculate total direct/indirect and media spending to exceed \$3.3 million when an Elite or Open tournament is held there.

When I asked the Director of Event Partnerships if he would be able to schedule tournaments in Wisconsin if the culling restriction was lifted his response was "I could book a tournament tomorrow – cities are beating down my door." In fact, he has a list of cities, including Oshkosh, who called just last week.

In a 1985 issue of "Fisheries" – the publication of the American Fisheries Society, Dr. Larry Nielson (former president of the Society, author of 3 textbooks on fisheries management, and professor of natural resources at North Carolina State), expounded on the various philosophies of managing competitive fishing, ranging from protectorism, to brokerism and rationalism, to pragmatism. I fear that Wisconsin's fisheries managers may be locked in the philosophy of protectorism, where all competition is considered bad. While most fisheries managers as long ago as 1985 had accepted the biological innocence of bass tournaments, protectorists continue to raise new questions.

I'll conclude with a 1979 quote from C.W. Churchman, with the US Fish and Wildlife Service at the time that Dr. Nielson referenced him in his article: "We should manage so that the public will claim our ethic as their own, voluntarily, without regulation or enforcement. If we believe that competition compromises the fishing experience, we should work to change the attitudes and behaviors of anglers, rather than to change the laws regulating them."

The 2006 study of Public Awareness, Participation and Opinions of Fishing Tournaments in Wisconsin, conducted by the Wisconsin DNR's Bureau of Science Services offers results and conclusions that point the way to changing attitudes and behavior as well as the understanding of tournament anglers. If part of the issue is a perception that tournaments and tournament anglers are harming fishery resources that needs to change. One of the major findings of the DNR's study is that the results of the biological assessment of culling (which shows no significant impact) must be communicated to the public.

I am here to tell you that B.A.S.S. and the B.A.S.S. Federation Nation have the most vibrant conservation programs in all of freshwater tournament fishing. Our members, our professional anglers, our B.A.S.S. Tournament staff, and I pride ourselves on being ethical anglers and responsible stewards of the resource – way beyond catch-and-release and using state-of-the-art weigh-in and post-tournament release procedures. It's our culture.

Thank you for your time, and again, thank you for your proactive approach to the sensible regulation of tournament fishing in Wisconsin.