



***Wisconsin Wetlands Association Testimony on SB 252
Presented by Erin O'Brien, June 12, 2019***

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our testimony in support of SB 252. Wisconsin Wetlands Association is a statewide, non-profit organization. This year marks our 50th anniversary of working to improve understanding of wetland resources and encourage wetlands conservation.

We are grateful for the opportunity we had to work with Representative Steineke and Senator Petrowski on this proposal, and are very pleased that it enjoys the support of additional co-sponsors from both houses and both parties. We also wish to thank Senator Cowles for scheduling this bill for a hearing so quickly after referral.

SB 252 was born from recommendations WWA brought to the legislature last year on opportunities to promote wetlands as solutions to the state's large and growing water management problems.

Done right, restoring wetlands can help improve water quality, recharge groundwater, reduce groundwater withdrawals, and reduce flooding, but we see very little use of wetland restoration for water management in Wisconsin today. Practices that we know from decades of experience are common in other states, are not yet well established in Wisconsin.

There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the greatest barriers are that our hazard and resource managers don't have the expertise and don't know how effective and inexpensive it can be relative to other interventions. Demonstration projects are needed to prove the concept of wetlands as solutions and to show resource managers, land use decision makers, and even individual landowners, what it looks like.

My organization is engaged in several place-based projects where we're working collaboratively with local governments and other stakeholders to evaluate ways that wetland and stream restoration practices can help address local water management concerns. One example is our work with the Village of Plover and the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers to integrate wetland and floodplain restoration into watershed scale groundwater management efforts.

Another is our flood hazards work in the Lake Superior Basin. We got involved there after touring the area looking at culvert washouts following the 2016 floods. In those visits, we observed degraded stream and wetland conditions upstream from every damaged site. Essentially, widespread erosion was draining wetlands, disconnecting streams from floodplains,

and sending the rain and snowmelt they were designed to hold straight downstream. We also discovered that the extent of this damage and how the loss of wetland storage contributed to flood damages was not well known. We secured a grant to document these observations and to encourage repairing these wetlands to reduce flooding.

This outreach led to a collaboration with Ashland County on a FEMA proposal to develop methods to assess the location and severity of degraded wetland storage and prioritize restoration projects to protect vulnerable infrastructure. Other project partners include the Northwest Regional Planning Commission, USGS, and Wisconsin DNR. Wisconsin Emergency Management has recommended the project for funding. If it moves forward, Ashland County will be Wisconsin's first community to include wetland restoration strategies in their Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The demonstration projects proposed in this bill, will prime the pump for plan implementation by helping the County work through the design and construction of flood risk reduction restoration practices. But what's learned from the both the FEMA assessment and the demonstration projects will be of great value to any Wisconsin community looking for additional cost-effective ways to reduce flood risks and damages.

Though the work conducted with this funding will focus on ways restoring wetlands and streams can help protect vulnerable transportation infrastructure, the restoration work itself will also benefit farmers and other landowners who are literally losing ground to gullies, headcuts, banks and bluff failures, and other erosive processes.

If this bill is enacted, WWA will support the project in a variety of ways, including helping Ashland County prioritize restoration sites among the many shovel-ready options, and advising on project design. We will also help ensure the sites fulfill their demonstration purpose by leading post-construction educational tours for hazard and resource managers, road crews, and others in a position to replicate the assessment and restoration methods in their communities. The flood hazards work we've done to date has already attracted statewide and national attention, suggesting interest in outcomes from these demonstration projects will also be high.

We will do our work on this project with support from our members and other funders as part of both our Lake Superior Basin-focused work and our broader local government outreach program. We will not request, nor would we accept, any of the funding appropriated to Ashland County by this bill as the intended use of this budget request is to support project engineering and construction.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony and would be happy to answer any questions you have about the need for or benefits of the proposed demonstration.

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