Protecting Our Hunting Heritage

Wisconsin’s gun-deer season is underway and excitement is in the air. We look forward to these nine days all year for the opportunity to gather together with family and friends and all chase the same dream of bagging the big buck. We make deer camp, we make venison, and most importantly we make lasting memories.

Deer hunting also means big business in Wisconsin. According to the DNR, over $1.3 billion in economic activity is generated annually due to the deer hunt. These dollars have an even bigger impact on our communities here in the northwoods that are heavily dependent on tourism. The ripple effect of the spending hunters bring to transportation, lodging, taverns and restaurants helps to sustain our mom-and-pop shops throughout the course of a long winter.

Many of us come from a long family line of deer hunters and we now enjoy sharing the tradition with our kids and grandkids. This fall I have been working with my colleagues in the Legislature on several measures that will strengthen hunting rights in Wisconsin, so that we can ensure these outdoor opportunities are protected for the next generation.

The first initiative is Assembly Bill 433, authored by Rep. Adam Jarchow (R- Balsam Lake). Called the “Right to Hunt Act”, AB 433 aims to prevent hunter harassment and protect our citizens’ constitutional right to hunt, fish, trap and take game. Unfortunately, some extremists from an anti-hunting group called Wolf Patrol have recently been harassing hunters in northern Wisconsin. This small group of extremists is led by a convicted felon and makes a practice of following hunters around in the woods and interfering with activities of the hunt. Some have even gone so far as to follow the hunter home and sit at the end of their driveway, taking photos of their license plates and making menacing posts on social media. We cannot and should not tolerate this unlawful behavior in our state. Although current hunter harassment protections were put in place in the late 1980s, those measures are difficult to enforce and do not address all of the technology advancements law enforcement now encounter in the field. AB 433 sets clear guidelines that give wardens more authority to stop activists from stalking hunters. I am proud to be a cosponsor of AB 433. The bill was passed out of the Assembly Natural Resources Committee this week and I will be casting my vote in favor when it reaches the Assembly floor.

Another important piece of legislation is targeted towards hunter recruitment. This measure is Assembly Bill 411 and has been championed by my colleague Rep. Joel Kleefisch (R- Oconomowoc). Wisconsin currently operates a very successful Mentored Hunting program, where a youth can be accompanied into the woods by a parent or other sponsoring adult and gain early hunting experience. Statistics show that youth who are introduced to hunting at an early age
are more likely to follow that pursuit later in life and remain an active hunter and sportsman. Back when the Mentored Hunting program was originally passed into law in 2009, an arbitrary age limit of 10 years old was set in place for the participating youth. Common sense tells us that all children, both boys and girls alike, mature at different rates and different stages. Each child is unique and should be treated accordingly. For example there may be a 9-year old girl who is mature for her years and has shown a strong interest in learning about the outdoors, yet the current age limit of 10 years old would needlessly force her to wait for a future season. AB 411 will eliminate this limitation and instead allow parents – the very people that know their own children best – to decide when a youth is ready to be introduced to the hunting experience. I am a cosponsor of AB 411. The bill received a hearing this week in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee and I will vote to support it when it comes before the full Assembly.

Finally, it is important for our state to not only recruit these new young hunters but also to retain the seasoned hunters we already have. That’s why last session I led the effort to expand the ability to use crossbows and to remove the onerous limits on age and disability that had been in place for many years. That effort received wide bipartisan support and the first full crossbow season was conducted in 2014. I am proud to report that DNR statistics of archery license purchases from last year show that the additional option of a crossbow has the potential to add an additional 10 to 12 years onto the average bowhunter’s career. This is good news for Wisconsin, as it leads to more license revenue and ultimately to a more fulfilling overall hunting experience.

It is an honor to serve as your representative in Madison, and I will continue to focus on protecting the outdoors heritage that impacts us all. Enjoy the hunt!

*Rep. Mary Czaja (R-Irma) represents the 35th Assembly District, covering the cities of Tomahawk, Antigo, and Merrill, including all of Lincoln County and portions of Langlade, Marathon, Oneida, and Shawano Counties. She can be reached at rep.czaja@legis.wi.gov, by phone at 608-266-7694 or toll-free 888-534-0035.*