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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 628 *Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy* January 8, 2020

Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you for holding this public hearing today and giving me the opportunity to speak to you in support of Senate Bill (SB) 628. I would like to thank Senator Petrowski for working with me on this important legislation.

SB 628 makes needed reforms to two programs that provide assistance to farmers that suffer crop damage or loss caused by wild animals: the wildlife damage abatement program and the wildlife damage claim program. Senator Petrowski and I began looking at reforming these programs a couple of years ago when we heard concerns from farmers in northern Wisconsin that these programs were not fully meeting the needs of many farmers in this part of the state.

The wildlife damage that a number of farmers in northern Wisconsin face are caused by bears. While any type of wildlife damage can cause problems for farmers, bear damage is particularly destructive. When a bear feeds on crops in a field, it will usually roll around and damage far more of the crop than it actually eats. Only a small number of bears, sometimes as few as one or two, can level a large portion of a 40-acre field. For a number of farmers, the financial cost of these damages quickly reaches the \$10,000 limit on claims for the wildlife damage claims program. I have heard from some farmers that have experienced wildlife crop damage losses in the range of \$30,000- \$40,000 in one year. I heard a story from a farmer in my district that illustrates just how quickly the \$10,000 cap can be reached. This constituent said that a sow and her cubs broke open some of the silage bags on his farm that he uses to store feed. Due to exposure to the elements, much of this feed was ruined and the damages from this one incident alone put him at his \$10,000 limit, without taking into consideration any other damage done throughout the year in the fields.

SB 628 seeks to solve this problem by lifting the \$10,000 limit on damage claims. If the amount of claims exceeds the available revenue in a year, payments will be prorated. This bill also allows farmers to receive payments for damage to crops caused by the placing of bear traps and streamlines the administration of these programs under the Department of Natural Resources. In addition, SB 628 creates a new portion of the abatement program to provide some abatement assistance for farmers who farm on leased land and the landowner does not want to open their property for hunting.

Mr. Chairman and members, I ask for your support of SB 628 and thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today.