



**CONSERVATION
MINNESOTA**

RE: HF4482 (Sundin)

March 29, 2022

To: Chair Hansen and Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee,

On behalf of the members of Conservation Minnesota located in all of Minnesota's 87 counties, we write to express our strong support for HF4482 (Sundin). As an organization, our mission is to protect the people and the places that Minnesotans love; and restoring the ecological, cultural, and recreational integrity of our state is central to this goal.

HF4482 (Sundin) appropriates \$1,000,000 from the general fund to the Commissioner of Natural Resources for a grant to the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in order to expand Minnesota's wild elk population and range into northeast Minnesota. This appropriation follows the extensive, multi-year development of an elk reintroduction proposal by the Fond du Lac Band and enables the Band to begin implementing a robust process of interagency and stakeholder planning; public review; CWD surveillance; and eventual capture, relocation, and monitoring of elk. This project represents a long overdue responsibility in our state to restore and conserve a vital species, and it's time for the legislature to commit to its advancement.

The reintroduction of elk into northeast Minnesota reflects the core mission of the Department of Natural Resources and the environmental policy of the State of Minnesota at-large. The restoration, conservation, and management of environmental quality and state natural resources extends directly toward our responsibility for the return of this species. The continued conservation of Minnesota's environment relies on our commitment to reverse the ecologically destructive elimination of key species from our natural spaces. Doing so not only helps to repair the natural environment, but also helps to reconstruct the human-nature relationship in Minnesota, restoring a culturally significant species for Tribal communities, strengthening recreational opportunities for hunters, and allowing Minnesotans of all ages to witness and appreciate these amazing animals in their native environment.

The reintroduction effort put forth by the Fond du Lac Band is a thorough, practical proposal founded in years of local and comparative research and bolstered by successful precedent from past reintroduction projects in northwest Minnesota and across the Midwest. The process proposed by the Band allows for a reasonable, phased approach toward reintroduction, including considerations for chronic wasting disease, habitat adaptation, and agricultural impact reduction. And the project's implementation timeline delays capture and relocation until the completion of adequate stakeholder and agency planning. We strongly believe that this effort represents an inclusive and responsible pathway toward getting this done – and getting it done right.

As the committee considers this legislation, we want to thank the Legislature and the DNR for their longstanding commitment to elk reintroduction and management. For decades, the State has helped to reestablish this key species in northwest Minnesota; and now, it has a unique opportunity to continue this tradition and to restore elk within the northeast. We urge you to support HF4482 (Sundin), to help fund the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's restoration efforts, and to restore the integrity of Minnesota's environment for current and future generations.

Thank you for helping to protect the Minnesota we love.

Sincerely,

Nels Paulsen, Policy Director
David Pelikan, Policy Associate

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MINNESOTA DIVISION IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

Our Mission: To conserve, restore, and promote the sustainable use and enjoyment of our natural resources, including soil, air, woods, waters, and wildlife.

April 16, 2020

To: Sarah Strommen - MN DNR Commissioner

From: Ted Suss – MN Div. President - IWLA
Rich Staffon – W. J. McCabe (Duluth) Chapter President - IWLA

Subject: Support for Elk Reintroduction in Northeastern MN

Several years ago, the Fond du Lac Band (FDL) proposed studying the habitat suitability and social acceptance of an elk reintroduction in northeastern MN. Specifically, the study focused on the Nemadji, Fond du Lac, and Cloquet Valley State Forests as potential reintroduction sites.

Using ENRTF grant money, the University of MN set about surveying social acceptance of the public in the three counties, Pine, Carlton and St. Louis and found that over 75% of the respondents were supportive of reintroduction. This is an important consideration.

Unlike the elk herd in northwestern MN, where support historically has been more questionable, the residents in northeastern MN are far more supportive of the possibility of having an elk herd. In part, this might be explained by the landscapes uses in question. The northwest is far more dependent on agriculture, and the elk there have fed on farm crops, sometimes leading to crop damage depredation complaints from area farmers.

In northeastern MN, the proposed reintroduction sites are far less dependent on agriculture (and more on forestry), and what very little farming there is, tends to be focused on pasture and hayfield for small dairy operations and beef cattle ranching, with row crops almost non-existent. Like the elk reintroduced in Clam Lake, WI, we anticipate that an introduction in northeastern MN can occur without any significant social backlash.

In fact, it's the abundance of young aspen, a preferred elk food, that makes northeastern MN such a favorable location for the elk. Unlike western elk which need to migrate to access winter food, elk in other states, like WI, tend to have small home ranges because food and cover are locally abundant. In northeastern MN, we anticipate it would be the same here. Again, this would alleviate the issues of crop depredation.

The question of whether elk could find suitable habitat in northeastern MN was also studied. Again, this should not be an issue. Elk at one time stretched from coast to coast and thrived in an array of habitat types, showing

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that they are extremely adaptable. Finding suitable habitat should not be an issue, and that's precisely what the study determined.

There are hurdles to overcome in a reintroduction. One of the most challenging may be wolf and bear depredation during the startup phase of the reintroduction, when the population is still modest in size, and high mortality rates could hinder or prevent population growth. But there are other issues, like finding a state(s) with CWD-free elk, that are willing to partner with FDL in supplying a captive herd as seed for reintroduction. And there is a financial commitment to overcome, to acquire/transport and maintain the animals prior to release. The estimate presently is about \$1M dollars.

To more easily facilitate the reintroduction, we have a suggestion. Suspend or limit the elk hunt in northwestern MN, and use any surplus elk there, to start or supplement the herd in northeastern MN. This eliminates having to acquire elk from other states, greatly reduces the cost to acquire and transport the elk, and MN can be assured that these elk are taken from a state with an active/well-orchestrated CWD program. The entire package is now more self-contained and affordable. All while at the time keeping the herd in the northwest in check. A win-win.

So, while there are still obstacles, none of these issues individually or collectively are insurmountable. With proper planning, each can be dealt with, and a reintroduction done successfully to the benefit of all Minnesota residents.

The MN Division of the Izaak Walton League is fully supportive of this project. We are now seeking the support of the MN DNR, and legislative leaders. We feel it is critically important to have DNR as an active part of the planning team going forward. Up to this point, DNR has been something of a silent partner, by not standing in the way of past planning and research efforts. What is needed now, is a more active participation in this project. This includes:

- Statements of support from the various levels of DNR leadership
- Active participation in planning by Wildlife staff, from the Division Director's level on down to the local fields staff.
- Some level of legislative financial support (ie. ENRTF or general appropriation) to help procure/transport elk from MN or other state(s)
- Ongoing collaboration in management of the herd following reintroduction. This must include startup and maintenance funding needed for drafting a management plan, for monitoring the status of the herd, and for dealing with any depredation complaints that may occur.
- And if all goes as planned, eventually the establishment and implementation of a state hunting season

The reintroduction of an extirpated native species is something we should all rally behind. Much like our turkey population and DNR's successful swan reintroduction, the opportunity to bring back a species inspires and reconnects people with the land. We visualize that someday an elk herd in northeastern MN might bring folks into the area simply to watch the elk, much like birders traveling to the Sax-Zim Bog, Hawks Ridge in Duluth, or in southeast MN along the Mississippi River to watch eagles and waterfowl and the beautiful scenery there. This reintroduction also implies there's economic incentive to support this project. In all these examples, people fill hotel rooms, restaurants, and local shops, creating a more varied and vibrant economy. This has been the experience in Wisconsin and other eastern states that have reintroduced elk herds.

Recognizing the challenging times we live in (pandemic accommodation), we would ask that DNR leadership reach out to the FDL Band and leadership at the McCabe Chapter, to begin (online?) discussions on how to best support restoring a missing part of our native fauna, by reintroducing elk to northeastern MN.

If you have any questions of the Ikes, please feel free to contact Rich Staffon at (218)879-3186.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Stay safe!

Sincerely,

Ted Suss, President, MN Division IWLA

Rich Staffon, President, W. J. McCabe Chapter, IWLA

- cc. Dave Olfelt – Fish and Wildlife Div. Director
- Mike Larson – Wildlife Section Supervisor
- Chris Balzer – Cloquet Area Wildlife Manager
- Forrest Boe – Forestry Div. Director
- Rick Hansen – House Chair Environment and Natural Resources Finance Committee
- John Persell – House Chair Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee
- Carrie Ruud – Senate Chair Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Legacy Finance Committee
- Dave Ingebrigtsen – Senate Chair Environment and Natural Resources Finance Committee



**W.J. McCABE (DULUTH) CHAPTER
IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA**

P. O. Box 3063. • DULUTH, MN 55803

March 26, 2022

To: House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee
Re: Support for HF 4482 to allocate \$1 million to Minnesota DNR for elk reintroduction by the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa

Dear Committee Chair Rep. Rick Hansen,

I am writing on behalf of the W. J. McCabe (Duluth) Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America to indicate our full support for HF 4482 to provide funding for the reintroduction of elk into the Fond du Lac State Forest and Fond du Lac Reservation in Carlton and southern St. Louis Counties. Many of our chapter members are hunters, and all are wildlife and wildlife habitat enthusiasts who are excited about the prospect of returning the iconic elk to this part of Minnesota. We are very familiar with the landscape and people in the area being proposed for this elk reintroduction and we agree with the findings of the study done by the Fond du Lac Band and the University of Minnesota that there is adequate habitat in this area for elk and that there is also strong public support for the project.

We believe there are many benefits to this proposal including the lofty goal of returning a highly valued wildlife species that has been extirpated from this part of Minnesota, the ecological benefits of regaining the biological functions that elk would provide to our northern forest ecosystem, the recreational value for local citizens and tourists to watch and photograph elk in the area, the cultural values that would be provided the Fond du Lac band members to once again have elk on their lands, and the potential to one day provide a hunting season for elk in eastern Minnesota.

We believe that the economic benefits of having elk in our area would far outweigh any problems that having elk on the landscape would cause. While row crops are uncommon in this part of Minnesota there is some potential for damage to hay crops and to fences by elk, and occasional vehicle collisions are also a possibility due to the extensive road network in this part of Minnesota that converges in Duluth.

However, many other states have successfully reintroduced elk in their forest lands such as our neighboring states of Wisconsin and Michigan. They have been able to manage the problems caused by elk without much difficulty, and have benefited from the recreational and economic values provided by elk. We think that it is well past time for Minnesota to do the same.

We believe that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, with the excellent cooperation being provided by the Fond du Lac Band, should be able to take advantage of this opportunity to return elk to eastern Minnesota. This bill would provide the necessary funding to make it happen, so that one day we will be able to hear the bugle of wild elk in our September woods!

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments on this bill.

Sincerely,

Julie O'Leary, President
W. J. McCabe Chapter, IWLA (jloinduluth@gmail.com)



Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Alliance

March 28, 2022

RE: H.F. 4482 (Sundin) Elk reintroduction funding provided, and money appropriated

Chair Hansen and Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee:

The Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Alliance writes in support of H.F. 4482, which will provide funding to expand Minnesota's wild elk population.

Elk are native to Minnesota and populations are currently managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources in northwest Minnesota. As elk numbers exceed their established population goals in northwest Minnesota, the proposal to move elk to parts of northeast Minnesota is timely. While agricultural crop depredation may be an issue in northwest Minnesota, the proposed area for elk reintroduction is not primarily an agricultural zone and movement of elk to the northeast could lessen the depredation impact in the northwest.

Once a sustainable population of elk is established, it will provide for hunting opportunities in Minnesota of a wild, big game species. Neighboring states that currently hold hunts have experienced high interest and demand from residents for these hunts.

As we continue to fight chronic wasting disease in our white-tailed deer population, appropriate health screenings and monitoring of elks must occur prior to any movement and release. While there are a lot of details yet to work out for an elk reintroduction plan, we believe that this is an important conversation and policy to move forward.

Thank you for your work,

David Carlson, President
Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Alliance