

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office  
Natural Resources Committee January 25, 2024

**BOSTELMAN:** All right. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Natural Resource Committee. I am state Senator Bruce Bostelman from Brainard, representing the 23rd Legislative District, and I serve as Chairman of this committee. The committee will take up the bills in the order posted. This public hearing today is your opportunity to be a part of the legislative process and to express your position on the proposed legislation before us. If you are planning to testify today, please fill out one of the green testifier sheets that are on the table at the back of the room. Be sure to print clearly and fill it out completely. When it is your turn to come forward to testify, give the testifier green sheet to the page or to the committee clerk. If you do not wish to testify but would like to indicate your position on a bill, there are also yellow sign-in sheets back on the table for each bill. These sheets will be included as an exhibit in the official hearing record. When you come up to testify, please speak clearly into the microphone. Tell us your name and spell your first and last name to ensure we get an accurate record. We will begin each bill hearing today with the introducer's opening statement, followed by proponents of the bill, then opponents, and finally, by anyone speaking in the neutral capacity. We will finish with a closing statement by the introducer if they wish to give one. We will be using a 5-minute light system for all testifiers. When you begin your testimony, the light on the table will be green. When the yellow light comes on, you have 1 minute remaining, and the red light indicates you need to wrap it up, for your final thoughts and to stop. Questions from the committee may follow. Also, committee members may come and go during the hearing. This has nothing to do with the importance of the bills being heard. It is just part of the process, as senators may have bills to introduce in other committees. A few final items to facilitate today's hearing. If you, if you have handouts or copies of your testimony, please bring up at least 10 copies and give them to the page. Please silence or turn off your cell phones. Verbal outbursts or applause are not permitted in the hearing room. Such behavior may be cause for you to be asked to leave the hearing. Finally, committee procedures for all committees states that written position comments on a bill, to be included in the record, must be submitted by 8 a.m. the day of the, of the hearing. The only acceptable method of submission is via the Legislature's website at [nebraskalegislature.gov](http://nebraskalegislature.gov). Written position letters will be included in the official hearing record, but only those testifying in person before the committee will be included in the committee statement. We will now have the committee members who are with us today introduce themselves, starting on my left.

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**HUGHES:** Thank you. There's not very many of us. Jana Hughes, District 24, Seward, York, Polk, and a little bit of Butler County.

**MOSER:** Mike Moser, District 22. It's Platte County and most of Stanton County.

**BOSTELMAN:** Also assisting the committee today, to my left is our legal counsel, Cyndi Lamm, and to my far right is our committee clerk, Laurie Vollertson. Our pages for the committee today is Ruby Kinzie and Shriya Raghuvanshi. Thank you. Thank you both for being here today. With that, we will start our first confirmation hearing for an appointment to the Environmental Trust Board. It will be Mr. Eric Hansen. Mr. Hansen, if you'd come forward, please, and have a seat. Good afternoon, Mr. Hansen.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Hello.

**BOSTELMAN:** We'd just like this-- like you to say your name. Spell your name for us. We'd like to learn a little bit about you, give some background information about yourself and why would you like to be on the, on the Environmental Trust Board.

**ERIC HANSEN:** OK. My name is Eric Hansen, E-r-I-c H-a-n-s-e-n. I'm a fifth-generation cow/calf rancher from Lincoln County. I've been married to my wife, Jill, for 30 years. She's a very patient woman. We do have 4 daughters together, and, and we've lived on the ranch ever since we got married. Been in the Sandhills all my life. I've been on the Sandhills Task Force board of directors for 18 years, and I've recently got off of the Twin Platte NRD, from being on that for about 20 years. I think that my involvement in those, those 2 boards has allowed me to see the impact that the Environmental Trust can have on a pretty large scale. Personally, I've transitioned several sets of pastures into rotational grazing systems. Used-- done a lot of cedar tree clearing, excuse me, a lot of cedar tree clearing. And those projects were partially funded with Environmental Trust money. And that's had a huge impact on, on the water, soil, and air quality in our area, which I think affects every citizen of the state, really. The Sandhills has always been my home, and I feel that I can bring my experience and my knowledge to benefit the Nebraska Environmental Trust.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you for your introduction. I'd like to have Senator Fredrickson introduce himself. He's joined the committee.

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**FREDRICKSON:** Yes. Good afternoon. I'm John Fredrickson. I represent District 20, which is in central west Omaha.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thanks very much. Are there any questions from the committee members? Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Thank you. Thank you, Chairman. Thanks for coming in. So over the years, the Nebraska Environmental Trust has like, provided a lot of grants for recycling. I did an interim recycling study off-session this last year. In one case, there was an effort in Alliance that they'd gotten a grant from them for 10 years in a row and then did not. Do you know if the trust has any initiatives working with, like, the NDEE or other organizations to keep Nebraska beautiful and keep, you know, those funds going toward, like, recycling efforts or anything like that, or what's your opinion on things like that, maybe?

**ERIC HANSEN:** I don't know specifically. I, I believe in this last round of grant approvals, there was a recycling grant funded. Yeah. I absolutely think that recycling is, is a, a beneficial use of the NET money, the funds. I think the people of Nebraska have decided that they'd like to see a large portion of the, the lottery funds go towards preserving our environment. And I think recycling is, is definitely worthy.

**HUGHES:** Very good.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Being out in the Sandhills, I can see where there's a lot of need out there. I'd like to become more familiar with the needs of the urban areas in eastern Nebraska, and with those projects, I know there's a tree planting project in Omaha that was funded this year. I'd like to look into that a little bit more--

**HUGHES:** All right.

**ERIC HANSEN:** --and see what that's all about.

**HUGHES:** Very good. Well, thanks for your dedication and effort-- or you know, actually wanting to do this. So we appreciate that. Thank you.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** The, the previous, you were-- and you stated-- I'm trying to look here on your notes. You said you were on the Sandhills Task

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Force. What was that about? What did you do? What's the task force do?

**ERIC HANSEN:** The Sandhills Task Force has been around for 25 years. It's a 501(c)(3). It was created by the Nebraska Cattlemen years ago, but it's a stand-alone organization that's made up predominantly of ranchers, but we also have board members from U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Nebraska Game and Parks, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited. And they, they apply for funding such as the Environmental Trust. A lot of U.S. Fish and Wildlife funds come in, NAWCA grants, a lot, a lot of different sources, to do projects like grazing projects, you know, putting in fencing and, and water development, stream and lake restoration, and a lot of cedar tree clearing. Yeah, I've been involved with that for a long time, and used some of that funding personally, on my own land. And-- but it's, it's just about the partnerships that bring all these people together to put-- to put conservation on private land.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Have you had the opportunity to sit in on any of the trust's-- on their, on their meetings, board meetings or that?

**ERIC HANSEN:** Yes. I've-- we've had 2 since I started.

**BOSTELMAN:** And where do you see yourself being involved with that? Are there different subgroups within it? Or do you see-- where, where is your biggest interest being on that-- on the Environmental Trust? Is there a certain area there that you feel that interests you the most?

**ERIC HANSEN:** Well, the, the grants reviewing, it would be interesting. I, I understand that rotates through the different board members. I think everybody gets a chance to be on that at some point. The-- some of the legislative stuff interests me.

**BOSTELMAN:** Sure. How many meetings do they do a year? Do you know? Is it quarterly? I don't remember.

**ERIC HANSEN:** I believe so. I believe it's quarterly.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK.

**ERIC HANSEN:** I, I know we had a special meeting in early January to, to award the grants. But I think other than that, it's, it's quarterly or maybe a little more often.

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**BOSTELMAN:** Any other questions from committee members? Do you see any potential conflicts from your ranching operation or anything you do now to being on the, on the board, or on the trust?

**ERIC HANSEN:** Timewise or--

**BOSTELMAN:** Time or otherwise.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Yeah, there, there is a conflict. I've filed a conflict of interest. Being on the board of the Sandhills Task Force, who is a-- an organization that receives Environmental Trust money. I mean, I've filed paperwork and we've had several votes and, and I either abstain or they've been nice enough to set those aside in a different motion so I can vote on the whole package and then abstain from, from what pertains to the Sandhills Task Force.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. We'll have the senators introduce themselves who have joined us today. Senator Slama.

**SLAMA:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Julie Slama, District 1, Otoe, Nemaha, Johnson, Pawnee and Richardson Counties.

**BOSTELMAN:** And Senator Jacobson.

**JACOBSON:** Senator Mike Jacobson, District 42, your district. Lincoln, Logan, Hooker, Thomas, McPherson and Perkins.

**BOSTELMAN:** So this is our first, for committee members who have joined us, this is our first appointment, Mr. Hansen. He's introduced himself. We asked him a few questions. Do you have any questions for him?

**SLAMA:** Just thank you for being willing to serve, Mr. Hansen.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Yeah. I, I, I don't know if it's a duty or an honor, but it's, it's somewhat in my, in my genes, I believe, to, to try and-- feel like I need to step up and, and do my part. Being from western Nebraska, it's hard to get people to drive down here on a regular basis and, and be part of the system, but-- or the process, but I'm--

**BOSTELMAN:** OK.

**ERIC HANSEN:** --proud, proud to be nominated to do it.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Jacobson.

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**JACOBSON:** Well, I would just second those comments. I, I appreciate you being, being willing to do it. And, and it certainly is in your genes. Your dad, Tom, was down here in the Legislature and had my seat back [INAUDIBLE] that-- all that many years ago. And I-- as I recall, was the Revenue Committee-- or was the Appropriations Committee Chair while he was here. So, thank-- tell your dad hi and thank you for his service. And thank you for what you're going to embark upon.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your willingness to serve us. And thank you for being interviewed today.

**ERIC HANSEN:** Thank you. This seat isn't as warm as what they said it was.

**JACOBSON:** But it's low.

**BOSTELMAN:** Anyone like to testify in support of the gubernatorial appointment of Mr. Eric Hansen to the Nebraska Environmental Trust Board, please step forward. Any supporters, please. Welcome. Good afternoon.

**SAM DRINNIN:** All right. Good afternoon. Senators, Chairman Bostelman and members of the Natural Resources Committee. My name is Sam Drinnin, S-a-m D-r-i-n-n-i-n. I serve as the chair-elect of the Nebraska Cattlemen Natural Resources Committee, and I own a feed yard near Columbus. I am here on behalf of Nebraska Cattlemen to support the appointment of my colleague, Eric Hansen, to the Nebraska Environmental Trust. I've been proud to serve alongside Eric Hansen on the Nebraska Cattlemen Board of Directors, and enjoy watching him chair the Nebraska Cattlemen natural resources committee. Whether it's tackling an invasive cedar tree issues or promoting rotational grazing, Eric Hansen believes environmental stewardship is not just a buzzword you throw out around in a board meeting, but a way of life. If you ask Eric why he believes conservation is crucial to the agriculture industry, he will tell you that's what's good for the cattle is good for the wildlife, soil and air. What's good for the cattle is good for everybody. As a fellow cattleman, I know our love for our land and animals bleeds into everything else we do in our life. In addition to his strongly-held belief in protecting the future of Nebraska's environment and desire to serve, Eric also has decades of experience to offer. As a lifelong rancher and a member of the Sandhills Task Force for over 20 years, there is no one who wants

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to achieve Nebraska's environmental stewardship more than Eric. Eric is a proven leader who will undoubtedly be a great asset to the Environmental Trust. For these reasons, the members of Nebraska Cattlemen urge you to confirm Mr. Eric Hansen. Thank you, and I would be happy to answer questions that you may have.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Drinnin. Are there any questions from the committee? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**SAM DRINNIN:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Is there anyone else who would like to testify in support of the gubernatorial appointment, Mr. Hansen? Seeing none, anyone like to testify in opposition? Seeing none, anyone like to testify in a neutral capacity? Seeing none, that will close our hearing of the gubernatorial appointment of Mr. Eric Hansen to Nebraska Environmental Trust Board. We'll move to the next gubernatorial appointment, which is Mr. Theodore Vasko, is it Nebraska Environmental Trust Board? Please come up, Ted.

**TED VASKO:** Thank you, Senators. It's Ted Vasko, not Tabasco, as it seems to roll off on cell phones if you don't have great reception. It's T-e-d V as in victory, a-s-k-o as in Oscar. I'm a lifetime Nebraska person, as is my wife. We have 4 children, 7 grandchildren. We currently live in Papillion, I guess, as we have our entire married life. Grew up in Millard, possibly in your district, what's, what's currently your district. We have-- I have a farming operation in southeast Nebraska, just, just west of Nebraska City a little bit. We farm about 1,400 acres. I also own some real estate companies. And, and I guess I'm open for questions.

**BOSTELMAN:** Sure. Thank you for your introduction. Are there questions from committee members? Senator Slama.

**SLAMA:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And welcome, Mr. Vasko. It's good to have one of my neighbors here for confirmation.

**TED VASKO:** Thank you.

**SLAMA:** Can you tell us a little bit about why you'd like to serve on the Environmental Trust Board and what's driving you to serve?

**TED VASKO:** So I'm kind of a conservation-minded person, person. Our, our farming operation is very conservation-minded-- windbreaks, filter strips. We, we do a lot of things our neighbors don't, sometimes at a, at a sacrifice to profits. But, I believe strongly

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in, in kind of doing the right thing. I've got a-- I, I personally think that we-- there's a lot that can be done with less fertilizer and still increase yields. I'm, I'm big on using manures. It's kind of a recycling type of operation for our farming. But I've, I've had a-- I've had a-- I've had a long passion for that sort of thing. So, yeah.

**SLAMA:** Fantastic. Thank you.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions from the committee? Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for coming in. You probably heard my question--

**TED VASKO:** I did.

**HUGHES:** --with the other gentleman.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah.

**HUGHES:** So a lot-- especially rural Nebraska, has seen recycling efforts propped up from Nebraska Environmental Trust, and then disappears quickly when that-- the funding goes away. Do you have any thoughts on recycling programs or-- I know you're new to this, too, but just kind of your thoughts in how that works with Nebraska Environmental Trust.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. I, I, I, I do. I, I believe government's, government's role in, in, in anything via grants or via, via tax, different tax structures is, is to get something started, but start something that can take off on its own, can run on its own after it gets going. There-- there's, there's a-- there's a long history of different businesses that probably wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for maybe some, some tax benefit or something up front that gets them started. But, I don't think to have it as a permanent, permanent-- permanently looking to the government for funding in most cases, not all, but in most cases is probably not healthy for, for, for anybody.

**HUGHES:** And that's-- it's a fair statement. But just from our research with recycling, the market has gone. It used to be that China would take a lot of our, our recycled goods. And so now we're kind of in this conundrum, if you will, that, what do you do with



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that material? There's not-- the best thing would be to create a market for it, right, and then it--

**TED VASKO:** Right.

**HUGHES:** --could be on its own. So you just wonder how much-- yeah-- how much can you prop up or-- and what's the worthwhile down the road of-- with our environment, you know, and not having it go into the ditches or water, all that.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah, absolute--

**HUGHES:** It's a challenge.

**TED VASKO:** --sure. Absolutely. So I'm really big on recycling. We have 2 garbage cans and our trash bin is rarely full, and our recycling bin usually has the lid open. So and, and, and our, our--

**HUGHES:** I hear ya. I'm the same way.

**TED VASKO:** --yep. And our recycling is all washed before it puts in. A lot of people throw it in with, you know, milk cartons that are half-soured with milk. Ours are all washed and rinsed. So I'm, I'm, I'm a big believer in recycling. I have been. I-- matter of fact, I made a lot of money during high school recycling, hauling scrap metal and that sort of thing. We, we had a-- we had a business start up in Papillion, and I never, never quite-- where I live-- and I never quite understood why it didn't take off. But they were using pop bottles, recycling pop bottles to make shingles. And they-- I believe they even shingled one of the buildings at the UNO campus, University of Nebraska-Omaha campus, with those shingles. And I always thought that sort of thing seems to be where we should be going. I, I, I couldn't give you an answer as how do we get there? But, I, I, I think those are the sort of things that, that really get recycling in the right place. And, and I would be-- I would be for anything that we could do that-- within the boundaries of what our, our limits are on the NET board. But just in general, anytime we could get something like that going, I think that's, that's, that's a great answer.

**HUGHES:** Very good. Thank you. And thank you for volunteering to doing this and for your time.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. You're welcome.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions?

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**TED VASKO:** Oh, Senator, if I could add one more thing. One passion I had, I, I coached, I coached a high school shooting team for 20 years. And one of the-- I've been away from it now for about 5 years, but one of my great passions.

**BOSTELMAN:** Small-bore or trap?

**TED VASKO:** Trap. Trap.

**BOSTELMAN:** Which, which team?

**TED VASKO:** The Creighton Prep high school team. And we, we actually, we actually grew it. We actually worked hard to grow beyond trap shooting. We, we really pushed into-- skeet shooting is offering something else for young people to do. And, and even the-- even the small-bore pistol shooting, I, I made an attempt at the end of my coaching career to get a league started with that. And it never quite got off the ground, but I, I ran out of energy.

**BOSTELMAN:** And that was about how many years ago?

**TED VASKO:** That was from 1999 to 1919.

**BOSTELMAN:** I coached--

**TED VASKO:** 20-- 20-- 2019. Sorry. 2019.

**BOSTELMAN:** There, that's better. You're not that old, right?

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. No. That's right. That's right.

**BOSTELMAN:** So we probably competed, because I coached at Oak Creek Trap.

**TED VASKO:** Oh, you did?

**BOSTELMAN:** Yeah. Oak Creek--

**TED VASKO:** Oh, my goodness.

**BOSTELMAN:** --4-H-- Oak Creek 4-H Trap.

**TED VASKO:** Oh, you guys had a tremendous reputation. Yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** So we, we-- I coached them about that same time period. So yeah.

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**TED VASKO:** Well, we were always fortunate. You were in the 4-H class, so we did not compete head to head with you at the state championship.

**BOSTELMAN:** We kind of shared some titles through those times [INAUDIBLE].

**TED VASKO:** That's right. We did. Yeah. Yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you. I'll have Senator John Cavanaugh introduce himself. He joined us today.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Senator John Cavanaugh, midtown Omaha. And my, my nephews are on the Prep trap team, currently.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. There, there was some Cavanaugh's on the team back when I coached also. That would have been in the early, early '20s.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Maybe my brothers were there. I graduated from Prep in '99, but my nephews are McGills [PHONETIC] that are on the team currently.

**TED VASKO:** OK.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** They seem to really enjoy it. But thanks for being here and thanks for your willingness to serve.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. Yeah. You're welcome.

**BOSTELMAN:** Have you had the opportunity to sit-- are you currently sitting with the board? Have you been to some of the meetings?

**TED VASKO:** I sat in on 1 meeting, yes.

**BOSTELMAN:** Do you have any impressions on the board, of takes from that?

**TED VASKO:** Actually, my, my first impression kind of surprised me a little bit. It was really quite well run. I try not to, not to default on government too much, but I didn't expect it to be as well run and answers to be right there when you have them, so.

**BOSTELMAN:** Is there, is there subgroups within it that you have an interest in, that you've seen?

**TED VASKO:** Not, not in particular. I think everyone there is, is-- the previous candidate had said to me, everyone has to be on the

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committee for the grants, the grant committee, at some point in time.  
Yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Are there any other questions from committee members?

**HUGHES:** One more.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** How many is on the board?

**TED VASKO:** I don't know that I could tell you that.

**HUGHES:** And how long-- OK.

**TED VASKO:** There's a dozenish.

**HUGHES:** How long do you serve?

**TED VASKO:** Till '28 or '29. So it must be a 6-year.

**HUGHES:** OK. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Cavanaugh.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you, Chairman. And I apologize for being late again, but just ask my one kind of standard question. Do you have a, a position on conservation easements?

**TED VASKO:** I don't. There's, there's, there's a few periodicals I read, ag periodicals, and Wisconsin and Minnesota have done a lot with ag easements and trying to preserve the agricultural community as, as urban growth, you know, sprawls out. And so I've, I've read and followed some of those. I don't know that I have an opinion other than-- I mean, nothing's, nothing's forever, I don't think. But, but I, I have followed those, those with interest. But--

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thanks.

**TED VASKO:** --yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Fredrickson.

**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you, Chair Bostelman. I-- I'll be really quick. First of all, the fact that you're a neighbor of Senator Slama's and then she grew up in my district, I think you are probably representing the best 2 districts in the state. But I also just

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learned that you coached, in trap shooting, the Clerk of our Legislature, Brandon Metzler.

**TED VASKO:** I did, yes.

**HUGHES:** Oh, no way. Wow.

**TED VASKO:** Yes.

**FREDRICKSON:** He shared with me that your son and him have 2 of the highest scores on history of Prep. So that's another fun fact.

**TED VASKO:** They do and they have 2-- they have 2 state championships, also.

**FREDRICKSON:** Yes. So very exciting.

**TED VASKO:** Yes it is. Yeah. Thanks for acknowledging that.

**FREDRICKSON:** But yeah. Thank you for being here, and thank you for your willingness to serve, as well.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. Thank you.

**SLAMA:** Remind me never to give Brandon a hard time. OK.

**HUGHES:** He'll take you out.

**BOSTELMAN:** Sounds like maybe we should have a-- had this at a, at a trap range.

**TED VASKO:** At the range. Yeah. Lincoln Trap and Skeet. It's not far away.

**BOSTELMAN:** There you go. All right. Seeing no other-- no other questions, thank you for your willingness to serve and being here today. Mr. Vasko. Thank you very much.

**TED VASKO:** Yeah. Thank you. Thank all of you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Would anyone like to testify in support of the appointment of Mr. Theodore Vasko to the Nebraska Environmental Trust Board? Anyone in support? Anyone like to testify in opposition to his gubern-- to the appointment to the Nebraska Environmental Trust Board? Seeing none, anyone like to testify in the neutral capacity? Seeing none, that will close our hearing on the gubern-- gubernatorial appointment of Mr. Theodore Vasko to the Environmental

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Trust Board. Thank you both for coming in today. Next, we'll have introduction, LB826 by Senator Blood. Good afternoon, Senator Blood. Welcome.

**BLOOD:** Thank you, Chair. I didn't-- I wasn't sure if it would be you or the Vice Chair today. Thank you, Chair Bostelman and members of the committee. My name is Senator Carol Blood. That is spelled C-a-r-o-l B as in boy, -l-o-o-d as in dog, and I represent District 3, which is the western half of Bellevue and eastern Papillion, Nebraska. I appreciate the opportunity to bring forward LB826, also known as the reduced Game and Park passes for veterans and active duty military members. So this legislation will allow veterans and active duty military, regardless of state residency, to access outdoors Nebraska. Changing the annual state park pass to \$5 is the least we can do for those who have served or are serving. Changes also apply to veterans and active military service members, regardless of residence, to obtain an annual pass for \$5 for combination fishing, fur harvesting, hunting permit, habitat stamp, aquatic habitat stamp, and Nebraska migratory waterfowl stamp. This legislation requires a veteran to present their motor vehicle license, state Identification card, or the individual's DD Form 214 that indicates their veteran status. An active service member will present their military ID card or their DD Form 214, as well. You shouldn't have to be a resident of Nebraska to be able to partake in Nebraska's outdoor sports. The outdoors can also be a vital outlet for treatment for those veterans and service members suffering from PTSD, anxiety, or depression. You know, I've been introducing legislation to benefit active military veterans and their families since my first year here, and this is another opportunity to further support this community. Nature-based therapy is gaining in popularity as a form of treatment for veterans suffering from depression, anxiety and PTSD. Around 11% to 20% of veterans experience forms of PTSD in any given year, and many do not receive treatment due to skepticism towards a generic clinical therapy and the general stigma that surrounds going to a typical therapy setting. Outdoor activities and exercises in a natural setting, such as a state or recreational park, removes the stigma while providing therapeutic treatment. We can encourage these same individuals to come and enjoy the Nebraska we all love with a small tweak in our fees. This legislation is a very simple step to provide support for our veterans and active duty military. This is a small fiscal cost compared to the positive outcomes our military members will gain from accessible outdoor recreation and the therapeutic benefits that come with it. Looking at the big picture, you'll note our hotels, restaurants, sporting goods

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stores, bait shops and others benefit from increasing this type of traffic to Nebraska. I ask the committee to get this simple but vital piece of legislation to the floor to add it to our ongoing list, as we strive to be the number 1 in the United States to be the friendliest and most supportive of our veterans and our military families. Now, I want to note that we had a productive discussion with Game and Parks regarding the loss of revenue the department may see. And we are really willing to be flexible about the reduced annual fee for veterans and active duty military members and those from our out-of-state residents. Games and parks also made us aware of a possible loophole in the language where a qualifying veteran or active duty military individual could purchase multiple permits, which I also want to permit-- to prevent. So-- but here's the good news. We were also made aware of possible federal funds being available in approximately 2 years in the future because of LB826. For persons who previously bought a hunting or fishing permit, Game and Parks will be able to report these individuals as certified anglers and hunters, thus qualifying for federal apportionment in a couple of years. We would like to explore this further, in how much this added revenue could offset the loss of revenue for the commission in the future. The bottom line is that out of all the bills that pertain to this topic this year, and I think you guys have 5, ours likely offers the best flexibility and serves not just veterans in our state, but all who serve. We can easily offer an amendment that finds a middle ground and move it to the floor for debate. I appreciate your time today, and I'm happy to any questions you may have. But I do know that there's also Game and Parks people behind me that can probably answer the more technical, technical issues in reference to fees.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions? Senator Fredrickson.

**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you, Chair Bostelman. Thank you, Senator Blood, for being here and for bringing this legislation and your willingness to sort of advocate for, for veterans, and our Game and Parks, as well. One question I did have regarding-- so I've, I've also been curious about the fees we have for hunting permits, etcetera, and ways to ensure that our parks are accessible to, to all Nebraskans, in particular, those who serve. Do you know, are there any federal dollars, matching funds that we get from park fees?

**BLOOD:** So because we do have people who actually work for those departments behind me, I'm going to ask if you would ask them. And you'll get a much better answer than you'll get from me.

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**FREDRICKSON:** Sounds good. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Thank you, Chairman. Thank-- thanks for bringing this, Senator Blood. Do you know of like, what other states are doing? Do they do similar things around us, or do you have any--

**BLOOD:** You know, to be very frank, we didn't compare ourselves to other states for this bill. We-- our only focus, as always, is to make Nebraska number 1 for veterans. I'd be happy to get you that information if you like. But--

**HUGHES:** Just curious if [INAUDIBLE].

**BLOOD:** --we were only worried about our state--

**HUGHES:** That's cool.

**BLOOD:** --when we worked this bill.

**HUGHES:** OK. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Jacobson.

**JACOBSON:** I just have one quick question and I'm certainly willing to defer it to the-- of the experts behind you, but I'm just thinking through the federal habitat stamps. How does that get paid for if-- are we going to pick that up at, at the state level? Do they still pay that? How, how would that work?

**BLOOD:** I definitely am going to defer that to the experts.

**JACOBSON:** OK. And, and one other quick question, I guess, along with that is, I'm just-- there will also be those who bought a lifetime permit, and I assume they're just-- they've already paid, so they're-- they continue to be [INAUDIBLE].

**BLOOD:** Yeah. I, I would assume so based on past legislation that I've seen that have done things like this. It might require an amendment to make that very clear in the legislation, which we're going to be amending this regardless.

**JACOBSON:** Well, again, I, I thank you for bringing the bill. I, I, I think anything we can do for veterans and particularly, from a therapy standpoint, I think it's a good bill. So thank you.



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**BLOOD:** And, and again, I know it's very unusual to, to offer amenities to veterans from outside our state, but imagine coming from another state and seeing how really great Nebraska is if you hunt and you fish. And I don't know. Maybe a few of them will kind of [INAUDIBLE] to our state and stay. You never know.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Slama.

**SLAMA:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Senator Blood, I do appreciate that, coming from a district where I've got 3 states bordering. We do have a lot of tourism coming over, especially to our communities in District 1, for tourism already. So I absolutely see your point of nonresidents wanting to come into Nebraska, too.

**BLOOD:** Thank you, Senator Slama.

**BOSTELMAN:** More of a intent question I have for you. So when we talk about hunting licenses and permits, we have certain categories of, like there's deer permits, there's elk permits, there's pronghorn permits. Is your intent with this as the general hunting license and not specific to that? And the reason why I ask is we have a deer season with quotas or an elk season with quotas. Is, is your-- I just wanted--

**BLOOD:** I mean, that, that was my intent. And I don't hunt, I fish. So I have to be very honest. That would be something that, as we work to hopefully amend this and make it better, we can address that.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. No, I just want to check to see if, if-- I figured that's what your intent--

**BLOOD:** That was my intent.

**BOSTELMAN:** --would be. But I just wanted to see if you had a-- other thoughts.

**BLOOD:** You guys make it so complicated to hunt. I'm just going to take a gun, and shoot what you want to shoot.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Other questions? Seeing none, thank you, Senator Blood. Will you wait for closing?

**BLOOD:** I will.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Thank you.

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**BLOOD:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** I'll ask anyone who would testify in support of LB826 to please step forward. Good afternoon.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Good afternoon, Senator Bostelman and the committee. My name is Greg Holloway, G-r-e-g H-o-l-l-o-w-a-y, and I'm here-- I'm the standing chair for the Nebraska Veterans Council. And I have advocated for veterans' legislative issues for, I figured it up, 34 years now. So I'm one of the old guys. So-- old, old guys. So Senator, Senator Bostel-- Senator Blood and I have discussed this bill, and we've discussed it on the floor of the Nebraska Veterans Council at our regular meeting. And, and we decided, yes, we will support this issue. And I don't have a lot to say about it. I know it breaks your heart I'm not up here talking for an hour. But if you have any questions about it, I'll sure answer. Nebraska Veterans Council, which is made up of 8 veterans organizations and the County Veterans Service Officers Association. We support it. We're OK with it. And our job is to see that the lives of veterans and their dependents are made better, and this is something that will help it make it a little bit better. So, short and sweet. Any questions?

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Holloway. Are there any questions?

**JACOBSON:** I, I just want to say thank you for, not only for your service with the Veterans Council, but your service as a Vietnam veteran. You got overlooked for far too many years and so, thank you, again, for your service.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** You're more than welcome. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** We had spoke before the hearings today, before we got started, that you may have a couple suggestions with that. Perhaps you could get those to me at some point in time, or to Senator Blood herself, if we haven't talked. You have. OK.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** We've talked about it.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Yeah, we discussed it and-- yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** I think everything will work out fine.

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**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Thank you, Chairman. I don't really have a question, but I just want everybody to know that Mr. Holloway is from District 24, the best district in the state of Nebraska.

**SLAMA:** It's nice you think that.

**HUGHES:** Let me live in my world.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Well, I know your dad.

**SLAMA:** You do?

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Well, yeah.

**SLAMA:** Oh my gosh.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** I'm from Bee.

**SLAMA:** Well, there we go.

**HUGHES:** What does that have to do with your dad?

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Yeah.

**SLAMA:** My dad's from there, too.

**HUGHES:** Bee, Nebraska?

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Yeah. That's good.

**BOSTELMAN:** All right, There it goes. We lost control already.

**SLAMA:** It's over now.

**BOSTELMAN:** It's all, it's all down home day.

**SLAMA:** Perfect.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions from committee members? Any questions? Thank you, Mr. Holloway. Appreciate you being here today.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** You bet.

**GREG HOLLOWAY:** You guys have a good afternoon.

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**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you. Any other supporters of LB826, please come forward. Seeing none, anyone like to testify in opposition to LB826? Seeing none, anyone like to testify in the neutral capacity on LB826? Good afternoon, Director McCoy.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Good afternoon, Chairman Bostelman and members of the committee. My name's Timothy McCoy, T-i-m-o-t-h-y M-c-C-o-y. I am the director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at our headquarters office in Lincoln, 2200 North 33rd Street, Lincoln, Nebraska, 68503. The Game and Parks Commission in the state of Nebraska recognizes and values the contributions and sacrifices of our veterans and military, and we do already have some veteran and military permits that you're probably aware of, but I may just highlight those. We do provide for any resident that is a disabled veteran between 50% service-related or 100%-- and 100%, or 100% disabled nonservice connected. They get a perpetual disabled veterans lifetime annual park entry permit that's free. We also have a-- with the same requirements, we have a free disabled lifetime veteran hunt, fish, fur permit, that includes all stamps for vet-- for disabled veterans that are at 50% or higher disability. And then for the age 64 and older, which is modified in this bill, we also have, for any veterans that are residents, a \$5 hunt, fish fur, fur harvest fee that includes all the stamps. We also have, for deployed military, hunt and fish for any resident who has been deployed out of state within the last 12 months on active duty, can come back and upon returning-- within 1 year after returning, they can get a annual small game, hunt, fish, fur harvest permit with all stamped for \$5. I just wanted to mention those. And then the other, the other thing that has come up in questions before that I'll address, is for military that are stationed in Nebraska. On hunting and fishing, they're already eligible. As long as they've been here 30 days, they're eligible to use resident permits. And then, obviously, our residents, if they keep Nebraska as their home state and they're on duty somewhere else, they still get resident permit fees. You know, we've, we've looked at this bill. We, we want to support veterans. The, the concern for us really comes down to trying to look at fiscal impact. And you, you can all see that in the fiscal note. We also do, do have some concerns with the nonresident, and I'll explain why. Normally, nonresident fees are higher than resident fees, pretty much across the country and in Nebraska. And if you look at the level of discount, I mean, the, the \$5 permit is a highly discounted permit, just so you're aware, it's about \$99 worth of value. So for, for a resident, we're looking at a 95% discount. At \$5, for a nonresident,

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you're looking at an almost 99% discount of what the value is of everything that's in there for that \$5 permit. And then when we, when we look at the resident park permit and the nonresident park permit, it's similar. The resident discount is about 84%. The nonresident discount would be about 93%. So I just want you to be aware of that. That's something that we've identified. I've went and looked at surrounding states. I've actually tried to look nationwide, in terms of states that provide, you know, veterans, veterans discounts for nonresidents. Pretty much, in-- within the states that surround us, the only one that does that is Missouri. And they allowed those disabled nonresidents to buy a resident-priced permit. There's a, there's a few other ones that are out there around the country, but there's really only, I think, about 8 states in the country that, that do that. There's, there's none that provides that sort of benefit to veterans across the board. So, so we've looked at this. We do-- we've talked with Senator Blood. You know, maybe there's some things we can do looking at some of those. In terms of our recourse, you know, there's always-- there's always the ask that we might have, that would, would the Legislature provide general funds for these sorts of benefits? Because if they don't, our, our challenge down the road is we will need to raise our resident fees at some point to accommodate those. And I would be happy to help answer the questions, but I didn't write them all down.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Jacobson.

**JACOBSON:** Thank you, Director McCoy, for being here and, and for giving this testimony, I guess, kind of focusing on the nonresident because that's probably where I have the indigestion as well, do we have any idea-- we're roughly saying a, a net fiscal note of about \$523,000. And I think that would probably be in the front year, but I think the 24-- or '25-26 revenue loss, about a million four. Do we have an idea of how much of that would be-- how much it'd be reduced if we weren't including nonresidents and really focusing on residents? Do you have any feel for that?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Well, when I look at '24-25, that's probably about \$106,000. I might be off. I'm doing math in my head, but close to that. And when we look at the hunt and fish, and then when we look at the potential nonresident park, I don't think we actually have that. Oh, there it is. It is broke out. That would be the nonresident park. So that would be the nonresident portion of that, about 300 and-- or what that total is in the first year, \$863,000 in the first year. In the second year, that would appear to be about \$178,000 of that \$1.4 million would be from that-- from the nonresident. And we-- how we

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estimated all of those, is we looked-- we had to go look at what the proportions of nonresident active military-- of what active military was across the country and looking at that same proportion of veterans.

**JACOBSON:** And just a followup question to that. I, I think-- I'd asked the question earlier on, on federal habitat fees, that kind of thing, how-- who picks that up?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** The fed-- that-- they would still have to, if they were hunting waterfowl, they'd have to buy the federal waterfowl stamp. We can't, we can't--

**JACOBSON:** Gotcha. So this is just the state fees.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yeah. We, we can't eliminate that federal requirement.

**JACOBSON:** Right. And you're not paying it for them, obviously.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Right. Right.

**JACOBSON:** Yes. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Fredrickson.

**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you, Chair Bostelman. Thank you, Director McCoy, for being here. I just want to follow up with a question I asked Senator Blood a bit earlier. I know you and I have spoke in the past about different permits for different areas. And I've, I've reached out about possibly changing fees for senior citizens, for example. But the federal dollars that match that would make that not necessarily feasible, wouldn't that? How-- would this impact any federal match funds?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** The way it's-- the way it's written, because they would-- the way that they're looking at the fee of \$5, with that \$5 fee, they will be eligible-- anybody who purchases one of these permits will be-- we will be allowed to count because they've purchased a permit for the Federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration because it-- and the way that is limited is you have to have at least \$2 for either-- for hunting and fishing if you're doing both. And so it definitely meets that, but it does take a-- I mean, it takes a pretty big revenue shot. This is probably, you know, and I hate to talk about money, but it's part of what we have to do.

**FREDRICKSON:** Sounds good. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Senator Cavanaugh.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you, Chairman Bostelman. Thank you for being here, Director McCoy. So good to see you. Just-- we've had-- I've, I've been here for these conversations about changing the fees before. If we were kind of going down the path that Senator Jacobson was talking about, to-- if you were just to do in-state veterans. Is that possible, or I know we sometimes are constrained in that federal, that the out-of-state can't be more than double the in-state. Would that apply in this situation?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** That wouldn't apply in this situation. Actually, in terms of-- in terms of looking around the country, there's, there's very few that do provide any of the-- any reductions in their license fees for nonresidents, for nonresident veterans. There's a few that do it for nonresidents that are disabled.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** OK. And you and Senator Fredrickson were talking a little bit. You were kind of, I think, explaining this extra-- other part of the fiscal note, about where we can get-- bring in some more money in the future. Is that what you were talking about is by getting more people to buy licenses, even though it's at a lower rate?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yeah. There-- there's the potential, if you get more-- if we got more veterans and military that were buying licenses in Nebraska, or that were ones that only bought a fishing permit or a hunting permit previously, and they were buying this combination license, which they'd probably buy, because it's very-- it's much cheaper than buying either one of the other ones. We can count those as certified anglers or certified hunters when we do our certification for Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration. And that is the excise taxes that come on hunting and fishing and hunting equipment and ammunition and guns on the hunting side, and then from fishing equipment on the fishing side. Those excise taxes are granted back to the states based on a formula, based on size of state, population, there's a couple of other things in there that I don't remember. But the one thing that changes from year to year is our number of certified hunters. So the more people we have that are, that are buying permits that are hunting and angling, then we become eligible for more dollars.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** So I mean, I'm-- if I'm reading it wrong here, it is out years, but it's 2027-28 would be \$722,000, is your estimated increase that we would take in.

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**TIMOTHY McCOY:** That, that-- that's estimated based on the current amount of dollars that we got the last year or those that were certified hunters and fishermen. And the reason there's a delay is the certification data that's used by the Fish and Wildlife Service is 3 years behind. So, anything that changes, that changes now, you wouldn't see-- you wouldn't see that there's a lag effect there.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Right.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Those grants, I guess the other thing I would clarify are not just grants that we can use to offset, you know, cash. It doesn't-- it's, it's a grant. You have to obligate it by project on eligible activities. Some of our work is eligible that we do, even with some of our like, wildlife management operations, our fishing operations, our hatcheries, we can get up to 75% of that back. We have a lot of work that we do, like law enforcement, that is not eligible for Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration. Obviously, our normal budget work that we do is not eligible. And then, communications and outreach is not eligible on anything that involves selling a permit. So, so it, it, it provides some potential increase in parts of our agency budget, but not all the way, not, not all the way across it. And it may not-- we will still probably run into a cash issue because those are reimbursable grants.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** OK. I just had one other question. This, this \$863,000 and \$1.4 million. What percentage of your total budget does that represent? I guess, how big of a hit are we talking about here?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** In terms of-- in terms of this, would be currently, with our current oper-- if you looked at just our current operating budget, that increase would be a little bit less than 1% in that first year. And I think in the second year would probably be a little over 1% of our budget-- total budget that we have.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Let-- Senator Brandt has joined us. Let him introduce himself to the--

**BRANDT:** Senator Tom Brandt, District 32, Fillmore, Thayer, Jefferson, Saline, and southwestern Lancaster Counties.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you, Senator Brandt. To follow on when you-- when the numbers that you're using in the fiscal note, were you-- is this based on active duty veterans only, or did you also consider, in your fiscal note, guard and reserve?



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**TIMOTHY McCOY:** We did, we did not include in our fiscal, guard. They can qualify if they've been-- if they've been active duty. But there's never been provisions that, you know, you're talking to National Guard members that are just [INAUDIBLE].

**BOSTELMAN:** Our guards-- our, our guard members can go on active duty.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yes.

**BOSTELMAN:** It's in the title they do, at, at, at deployments and stuff. So there are, there are times they can go on active-- or they are on active duty--

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yes.

**BOSTELMAN:** --those times. But the majority of their service is, is on the inactive status. So I was just wondering if the numbers you had, just to understand the intent of the bill, the numbers you had in your fiscal note, if you just considered the active duty.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** We, we did. We did not include guards. The only state, as I was going through this with our surrounding states, that does, does something for guards is Kansas, as they get \$5 hunt/fish and \$5 park permits. And the Kansas legislature directly funded-- funds that piece of their budget.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you. And Senator Cavanaugh were talking about this. You know, if, if you do not receive the, the funds from the permits and stuff, because I understand, as Senator Blood said, you know, economic development. You can have folks come in buying shells, buying clothes, stay in hotels, staying at restaurants, but you don't necessarily receive any of those funds unless they're staying at one of your parks, one of your facilities. How, how do you perceive that you can potentially over-- you know, make up the loss [INAUDIBLE]?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Well, there's about-- there's 2, I mean, there's 2-- 1, 1 option would be trying to get general funds, which we know will always be a challenge. The other option would be that we would have to do price increases on our existing permits. That would, that would be, you know, that's probably more within our agency control that we can work with the board, as long as we're not hitting our fee caps.

**BOSTELMAN:** Does your fees for your permits, for your fishing licenses and that, can only be used for certain categories--

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Correct.

**BOSTELMAN:** --as you were saying before.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yes. And there is-- there is no-- somebody asked about parks. There is no source of funding like this relative to the parks side. There are some grant dollars we can get, but nothing that's as consistent as the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration. It can be used for very specific projects that are improvements.

**BOSTELMAN:** I asked Senator Blood [INAUDIBLE] on the intent of the bill when she opened up, and I'll ask you the same question in this. As-- and permits go across the state, we have different types of licenses and permits you can get for different species, both, you know, waterfowl, and upland birds and, and, you know, deer, elk, antelope, those type of things. How do you see this being applied? Do you think we need to do-- if this bill would move forward, is there language that would need to be added in there, to say that it does not apply to, say, a deer permit or a elk permit or, or that. Are those separate enough that you feel, in the bill, that, that you still can manage those-- we're not going to have, during a deer season, someone come in to buy a-- get a deer tag, which would be problematic if you're trying to set a certain quota as far as populations or tag populations.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yeah. The way this is written is like our existing permits, that are really-- that are the basic, you know, hunt, fish, trap, and all, and all the associated state stamps. Now, the hunting permit, we're talking about small game hunting permit. So that allows, you got small game and waterfowl. It would not, the way it's written, directly apply to fees for, you know, big game, deer, elk, turkey, anything that requires a separate-- in many cases, a separate application for a draw for a lot of those. So I don't, I don't think the way it's written, it would, it would do that. It is tied sim-- very similarly to our existing permits that do that same very thing, that it's the hunt-- it's the hunting, the fishing. The one advantage they would have is they would already have their habitat stamp so they could still apply or get a deer permit or an elk permit or, well, not for nonresidents. But if they're a resident, they can get it now, the permit. And they would, they would still have to pay that permit fee, but they wouldn't have to buy the habitat stamp.

**BOSTELMAN:** So as a resident or nonresident deer or turkey, either one, let's say turkey permit, this wouldn't apply to that nonresident tag for that-- the cost for that turkey permit.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Correct. They would still have to buy [INAUDIBLE].

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**BOSTELMAN:** And it's just our gen-- it's our general permit, general hunting permit.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yeah. And that is, that is the same way it is in all the surrounding states and pretty much everywhere around the country. And I think part of it is we know some of those permits are going to be limited. So you don't really want to--

**BOSTELMAN:** Well they're limited and obviously, there's quotas, there's game management portion, and there's some things you need to do. And you're not going to be able to-- you have to maintain control over that, if you will. So--

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Yeah.

**BOSTELMAN:** --I mean, that, that makes sense. So, yeah. Senator Fredrickson.

**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you, Chair Bostelman. I'll, I'll be quick with this. I know I asked you a bit earlier about federal matching funds. If I remember correctly, Senator Blood mentioned in her opening, there's some, maybe potential future federal funds. Do you-- can you speak more to that or what?

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** That-- that's, that's based on if we had, especially new people coming in or folks that were already-- that were already buying and-- that were already buying a permit, but they only bought a fishing permit or a hunting permit. If they bought this combined permit, then the-- they could be counted both as a fisher and a hunter, hunter. And then the other thing, given the cost, we would expect, given the-- this is a very reasonably priced permit, it's \$99 worth of value for a resident. It's-- I've got the numbers for nonresidents. It's way higher on those. We will see a lot-- we think that a lot of those will sell. So we will gain-- we will gain something there. And the challenge is there will be some, probably holes. And on parks cash, there is no-- there's no federal aid source to backfill that. So that's a concern.

**FREDRICKSON:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Any other question from committee members? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Thank you.

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**BOSTELMAN:** Anyone else like to testify in the neutral capacity on LB826? Seeing none, Senator Blood, you're welcome to close.

**BLOOD:** So I want to very-- be very clear. We didn't do this bill because we thought it was going to be easy. We did this bill because we wanted to start somewhere. Texas, by the way, who is considered the number 1 military-friendly state, does give out park passes for free, regardless of where the veteran is from. We looked at that real quick when we're sitting over there. I was sincere when I said, I think that there's middle ground. There's middle ground. And we know that there are some alternatives for them to find some cash to get over the hump and bring in more cash, because it does combine the different types of permits. We don't want to give away the farm, but we needed to start somewhere, and we started at a level that we were asked to start at, by Nebraska veterans. We were surprised at how many people from out of state reached out to us after we dropped the bill. We didn't even understand that there was a national organization that encourages veterans to fish and hunt across the United States. I think they-- one of the members may have written a letter of support, as well. Even if we don't keep it at 5 but we met halfway, and then you look at the fiscal note, I think that this could be doable. And we've already discussed, with the 2 gentlemen behind me, that we would be more than happy to iron it out and make it so it would be more doable. We are nowhere near the top 10 for best states for the veterans yet. And as long as I could remem-- as long as we've been here, Senator Bostelman, we keep striving and striving, and then a state outdoes us again and again. And this is an opportunity for us to be first in the nation, because we're not finding any other states, by the way. We're finding bits and pieces, but not combined. And I know that they don't benefit from hotels and motels and restaurants and bait shops. But when our state's economy does well, everybody does well, and it also offers up funds that we might not have in our coffers otherwise. So I think if we would discuss it for a long period of time, we could figure out that there are options. We can make it more financially feasible, and we could be making news as being the first state to do this. But again, I do not want to tap out those 2 departments. But based on the conversation we had yesterday, it's my understanding that they'd be willing to meet with us and see if we can find still a discounted price, but a price that would make it so it wouldn't be hard on them, and that they could maybe manage. And I'm hoping you give us that opportunity to bring forward an amendment, and maybe we can try and get this to the floor.

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**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Thank you. Are there questions from committee members?  
Senator Brandt.

**BRANDT:** Thank you, Chairman Bostelman. Thank you, Senator Blood, for bringing this. And forgive me, I had to introduce a bill somewhere, and I'm coming to the party here sort of late. Point of clarification, this is for out-of-state veterans, also?

**BLOOD:** It is.

**BRANDT:** But this does cover active duty veterans in-state?

**BLOOD:** Yes.

**BRANDT:** Not out of state.

**BLOOD:** No. Well, yes. All veterans. All veterans.

**BRANDT:** So it would, it would cover the entire military then?

**BLOOD:** Yes.

**BRANDT:** All right. Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions? Seeing none, thank you for bringing the bill.

**BLOOD:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** We do have, we do have 2 proponent comments and 1 in the neutral for LB826. And that will close our hearing on LB826. Thank you, Senator Blood.

**BLOOD:** Thank you for your time. I look forward to hopefully working on you-- with you on this.

**BOSTELMAN:** Next we'll hear Senator Vargas. We'll have LB1036, while opening on Senator Vargas' bill. Good afternoon, Senator Vargas. Welcome.

**VARGAS:** Get excited, folks. OK. Good afternoon, Chairman Bostelman and members of the Natural Resources Committee. My name is Tony Vargas, T-o-n-y V-a-r-g-a-s. I represent District 7, which includes the communities of downtown and south Omaha. I'm here to introduce LB1036, which would remove the fees for stamps and permits for hunting and fishing for Nebraska veterans, active duty and reserve duty individuals. This is an idea that many constituents, and it

seems like I've talked to many senators, including mine. So it was based out of a constituent, clearly an issue, because we're not only hearing it from me, similar legislation from Senator Blood and Senator Sanders. So several of our colleagues have introduced some sort of similar legislation, specifically Senator Blood, Senator Sanders. I know, for Senator Sanders, she introduced LB1406, which, in our conversations with Game and Parks, covers some more of their concerns. That being said, I'm happy to support not only Senator Blood's, but also Senator Sanders' bill, and want a version to get out. It does not matter to me which version get outs, but we should clearly do something in this arena. And, and that's my ask of you, that we work on this in some way, shape or form. If it-- it does not matter to me if it's this bill, if it is Senator Sanders' bill or Senator Blood's bill. The most important thing is that we do something in this arena. I'm expecting that Game and Parks will come in in neutral testimony similarly for this. I will definitely close because I'm trying to do a little bit of navigating on the financial status of some of these Game and Parks cash funds, which is a helpful conversation for us to have. With that. I'm happy to close. Again. And the only other thing I'll say here is, the reason why I introduced this legislation, and for those of-- some of you that are new, I've introduced past legislation to help veterans. We introduced the Student Veterans Support Act. Specifically for higher education, the Veterans Promise Act, that streamlines the, the process and admission requirements for, for veterans within the last 10 years, that-- we worked on Senator Bostelman and we expanded that from 5 years to 10 years, actually, with your, with your support. That passed about 4 years ago. And so, this is just in, in the spirit of continuing to help veterans, not only for veterans like my, my brother, that served in the Navy for 6 years, but for many of my friends and family and constituents. So with that, happy to take any questions, if they are different from the ones that were already asked of Senator Blood. Otherwise, I'll definitely close and talk a little bit about the cash fund status.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you, Senator Vargas. As Senator Vargas said, we'll work together on the other bills. And if there's any other questions you may have from committee? Seeing none, thank you very much, Senator Vargas. Anyone like to speak in support of LB1036? Anyone like to speak in opposition to LB1036? Anyone who would like to speak in the neutral capacity on LB1036? Good afternoon, Director.

**TIMOTHY McCOY:** Good afternoon. Timothy McCoy, T-i-m-o-t-h-y M-c-C-o-y. I'm the director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 2300 North 33rd Street, Lincoln. Obviously, we're here in a

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neutral capacity, very similar. I will just point out one of the challenges that we have with LB1036 over Senator Blood's bill, is that any of, any of these new free permits, none of them will be eligible for the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration, which has a farther down the road impact, you know about-- well, estimated in '27-28 at about \$1.2 million. And that would, that would carry forward as more of these are, are put out that are free permits. We watch those fairly careful. With that--

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Thank you, Director. Questions? Senator Jacobson.

**JACOBSON:** Yes, Senator-- or Director McCoy, I, I, I guess I kind of wanted to follow up. Really, both these bills had similar fiscal notes. But if-- you had mentioned before that if you lose this revenue, this net revenue, and there is no state appropriation to make up that difference, and you were then to pass this through to the remaining permit holders, what does that do? Does that-- are we-- is that going to be passed through or is there going to be any net loss of-- people are saying that number is too high? I can't-- I'm not going to do this anymore. Where, where do you see that working?

**TIMOTHY MCCOY:** We're always trying to be careful about doing fee increases, especially on residents, because we're always concerned about that. The nonresidents, if they're traveling, it seems like there's, there's more demand for nonresident hunting right now, and fishing. We are seeing some increases in fishing in terms of residents. So I, I, I think there is that, that real issue there. And then, you know, the compounding factor of, of those-- of not having that federal dollars that helps provide some of the other work we do that-- it supports hunting and fishing. It is really a lot of our work on managing game and managing fish. So yeah, that's, that's why, you know, given the 2 options, Senator Blood's bill obviously has some positives, positives with it. And there's still some concerned about just cash, cash flow, looking in the future.

**JACOBSON:** Thank you.

**BOSTELMAN:** Other questions? Thank you for your testimony. Anyone else like to testify in neutral capacity? Seeing none, Senator Vargas, you're welcome to close.

**VARGAS:** OK. If you want to do this, you can do this. I have tons of respect for each of our commissions and agencies. And the reason why I say this is, in the Appropriations Committee, we, we have a lot of conversations about ongoing revenue and obligations. There are a

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couple of things that are absolutely true. One, you're gonna lose revenue across these 3 different cash funds. I'm forgetting all 3 of them now, aquatic habitat, habitat, and park cash fund. You will lose revenue. However, there's 2 big concerns that I'm flagging for you, that I'm doing this on behalf of Senator Erdman, he's somewhere here listening, and the committee. Which is one, not just these cash funds, many cash funds within Game and Parks. Some of them have, I would say, healthier fund balances, which is not good or bad. That's up to you. That's up to that committee. That's policy. And if you're ever curious, you can look in the-- the Governor is identifying some cash transfers out of these Game and Park funds. Right. There's a few of them. Right. Part of the rationale is that there's an increasing balance that is carrying over. An example is, let's see here, what's-- the State Game Fund has, as of the end of 2023, \$32,000,005-- \$32,000,500, in it. Now, I bring that up to you because that means, in some of these, there's enough of a balance to be able to carry over and, and meet the demand, at least for, definitely, a few years, some of these ones. So if you wanted to, you can look a little bit more detailed into is every expenditure that Game and Parks wants to do in this given year or for future years, can we save costs on some of those things to make up for a \$1.5 million revenue loss? And I think the answer is you probably can figure-- we can figure it out. And, and I say that because, if you look at, and, and I wish I had copies of this. I just didn't think that it was going to come to talking about this. In this book, you can see that the, the expenditures in a lot of these cash funds, some of which we're talking about, have increased over time. We have and I have supported new expenditures within the game and cash funds, which is great. It's with the intent of trying to bring in more tourism. And it's trying to be good to Nebraskans, it's trying to be good to our constituents. But in some of these cash funds, you will see, like for State Game, Game Fund, we've increased our expenditures, from 2020, from \$24 million to \$37 million expected in 2025. So we are using the funds for different things. But if you want to-- we're, we're talking about tens of millions of dollars, if you want to do this and find \$1.5 million, I'm really advocating for everybody else's bills. You, you, you can figure it out, and we can look and talk to Appropriations and find-- what are some things that maybe might be delayed. They might be obligated expenditures. We, we can figure it out. But I've looked at a lot of these cash funds. Most of them have a beginning balance that exceeds what their expenditures are. You know, the, the Nebraska Habitat Fund has \$13 million at the end of 2023. The expect-- the total revenue was about \$8 million. The total expenditures is about \$8 million. I won't be here next year in the Appropriations Committee



or for you, but I do think there's probably a good conversation between your committee and Appropriations on-- we never want to get to a place, which I agree with, where the general fund is making up obligations for these cash funds. That's one. But we also want to get to a place where we're not over-- we have too many expenditures that exceed the revenue, which in some of these cash funds is the case right now. So I'm bringing it up because it seemed-- he's totally right. The Director's right. We, we will lose revenue, and it is a concern. But we're also-- it's because we are spending more money on different things, and we have supported that in-- substantially more over the last 5 years. And I hope that those expenditures will continue to lead to larger revenue increases in these funds, so that we can afford to do things like good bills like this, or, or Senator Blood's bill or Senator Sanders' bill. So I just wanted that to be said. It is worthwhile to look at these. There's at least a couple of these. We have not taken any action. I know the Director knows this. We haven't transferred any of these funds yet. I think that was very prudent of us. This way, the Director gets to come in and talks-- talk about why, why we should or should not sweep some of these funds from Game and Parks cash funds. But I want to bring that up to you because there's big fund balances in some of these things. Some of them are obligated, some of them are not. But in the larger scheme of things, I still think the 1.5, if you want to make it, so if you want to work with Appropriations and look at some expenditures, it, it-- we could do it. It's just up to you all. So, happy to answer any questions if there is from that.

**BOSTELMAN:** Thank you, Senator Vargas. Senator Jacobson.

**JACOBSON:** Well, I just want to make sure I understand what you're saying with this. I mean-- OK, I'm, I'm a banker. And so, I, I get this all the time, when people tell me, well, there's cash here, and we can, with these other savings, we can justify this. But, you know, with these other savings, we could actually lower the costs altogether. OK. If those savings are there, let's take them and just get the savings. OK. So I, I never bite too heavily into those. I, I would also say, to me, the bigger concern on the whole cash fund issue seems to me to come back to where have these revenues come from? Just as we've talked before, everybody's paying a fee today to get a hunting permit, park permit, so on. If those fees were cut in half, would we get more tourism? Would we get more people here? But if we did that, there would be no extra revenues there. So we're still, as I understand it and I guess as I would see this, we're, we're still making an expenditure. And so we're really trying to categorize which is the highest and best use. And I think-- most

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everybody on the committee here, I think, feels that we want to do something for veterans. The question is should it be all veterans outside the state, as well? Should it be \$5 or should it be a 50% discount? Or where do we justify that and still be fair to others? Is-- but is, is that kind of the, the thing you're looking at or where-- how do you-- how do you-- how do you size that up?

**VARGAS:** Yeah, I mean, I, I just-- what I'm trying to communicate is there-- if the bright line is like, I want to figure out how to make this happen. And we're-- are we OK with losing \$1.5 million in revenue loss and, and also not making their life that much harder? The question I would ask is, what are all of our expenditures in these cash funds, and are they all absolutely necessary right now? Could we find \$1.5, \$1.5 million that could be reduced? And there are tens of millions of dollars of expenditures in each of these cash funds, so then the answer is yes. And I'm also flagging for you that these cash funds are, right now, some of them on the docket to be swept in the Governor's proposal. So if we do sweep them, we are absolutely making it even that much more difficult that you'd be able to do things like this. And they're going to eventually rely on the Appropriations Committee and come to us and ask for general funds, or introduce new increases in fees on other people to make up for it. So this is living beyond this bill. I'm sort of just flagging this for everybody on the committee, too. I know you know this, Chairman. Right? We, we-- when we had a brief conversation about some of these things identified by the Governor. It's a bigger conversation, but, we're-- yes. I know that's a little broad.

**JACOBSON:** Just a quick follow up. I--

**VARGAS:** Yeah.

**JACOBSON:** --the-- I know the Appropriations Committee is looking at that request. Is that going to come to the floor or not? Because I can tell you, there's a lot of pushback on a lot of these cash funds that have been generated-- particularly those that have been generated by user fees. There are a lot of constituents upset about whether or not that should be done.

**VARGAS:** In my opinion, cash funds, especially like these user fees, are designed to sustain, sustain Game and Parks and enable them to grow and develop. And they, and they are doing everything they can to be good stewards of these dollars. And, at the same time, taking cash funds from these entities is a very short-term solution to trying to backfill our budget--

**JACOBSON:** Completely agree.

**VARGAS:** --right, and don't provide us with any sustainable. But I also then say, as a-- the fiscally responsible aspect of every single one of you and myself is, we should be looking at what our expenditures are big projects for Game and Parks to make sure that we can sustain them. And that is a concern, because there are some of these cash funds where we're spending \$5 million more than what revenue is coming in. We have healthy reserves, but we are still not making enough revenue than the expenditures. And we're hoping we are. So, yes, on the larger thing, there will be a conversation. We have taken no action on the cash fund transfers in Appropriations Committee. We will have hearings on those. People will be able to come in and agree or disagree on whether or not we make those cash fund transfers in the budget, and they'll come to the floor and we'll debate them. But that's happening in Appropriations over the next couple-- and I know that the Director will be there for that conversation on the cash fund transfers, as well. So.

**BOSTELMAN:** OK. Other questions? Senator Cavanaugh.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Chairman. Thank you for being here, Senator Vargas. I just want a clarifying question for the record of the folks who aren't sitting in the room. Can you tell us what book you're referencing and what the pages are?

**VARGAS:** Yeah. I'm referencing-- well, first, 2 things I'm referencing. One, I'm referencing the mid-biennium budget adjustments orange book that you should have all received, which is the Governor's recommendations. And on pages 59 and 58, which cover a couple of different cash funds for Game and Parks: Nebraska Habitat Fund, the State Game Fund and then the State Park Cash Revolving Fund. But then I'm also referencing, which you all have in your office and you should have, but it's handy to look at, is the 2023 Legislative Fiscal Office Directory, which includes all the updated Game and Parks cash funds and, and our expenditures. So that, to your point, you can get a sense of when we say that we're losing-- it could affect 1 or 2% in the 2025, 2026 years, it matters how much we have in the balance. It matters how much we're spending out of these balances. It matters how much revenue we have coming in. And so these books are incredibly helpful. And not every senator knows that you can look at this, and you have it in your office. If you don't, come and talk to me or go to LFO, they'll give it to you.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you.

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**BOSTELMAN:** Appreciate the conversation going on. I think we've talked about it or Director McCoy's talked about it, too, when we talk about those cash funds, you're talking about there's some federal funding that gets tied to that. And we got to be real careful when we do that. And fiscally, being fiscally responsible all the way around is a good thing to be doing. Challenge always is, is to make sure-- I think it is, is to make sure we don't get kind of like the federal government, where we're zeroing out every year, because then what happens is spend, spend, spend.

**VARGAS:** Oh, yeah. I don't like that, either.

**BOSTELMAN:** And that's not, that's not, that's not, you know-- so I think we're all on the same page on that one, you know. So, any other questions? Seeing none, thank you, Senator Vargas.

**VARGAS:** OK. Thank you all.

**BOSTELMAN:** There were 2 proponent comments and 1 in neutral on LB1036. That will close our hearing for today. Thank you all.