



## Wisconsin Land+Water Conservation Association

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Date: January 12, 2022  
To: WI Land+Water Executive Committee Members  
From: Matt Krueger, Executive Director  
RE: Recommendation for “Virtual” 2022 WI Land+Water Annual Conference

Executive Committee Members,

After considerable deliberation with WI Land+Water members, staff, partner agencies, and fellow conservation organizations, I submit this memo to recommend we hold our March 2-4, 2022 Annual Conference “virtually,” as opposed to in person at the Chula Vista Resort in Wisconsin Dells.

The COVID omicron variant surge is currently at alarmingly high levels; whether or not that remains the case in two months’ time we do not have the luxury of knowing, but the unfortunate reality is that we need to make a decision on the conference now, based on what we currently know.

As you all are aware, WI Land+Water’s conference is a first-class event that we take considerable pride in hosting; it is my opinion that if we pursued an in-person conference at this point, it would be difficult for us to guarantee the same high-quality conference experience our members, sponsors, and other conference attendees have come to expect.

Our conference is about many things—motivating keynote speeches, informative technical content, inspiring awards celebrations and poster and speaking contests, and much more. Possibly no aspect of it, however, is more important than convening our members to physically *be together*. While “being together” in an ongoing pandemic means different things in different counties, as a statewide organization, we have to consider the implications of bringing together hundreds of people over a period of three days, from all corners of the state. While every conference attendee would be making a free-will decision to attend, the possibility that our conference could contribute to potentially serious health outcomes in our membership is something we must consider.

Though we have heard enthusiasm from some of our members for an in-person event, we have also heard from others that they will not be able to attend due to COVID precautions, or their own hesitancy. It is hard to say what overall member attendance would look like in an in-person conference, but I suspect it would be lower than what we typically expect.

Another group of would-be attendees to consider is the staff of WI Land+Water, who are vital to the success of the conference. Our staff has, for the most part, attended in-person meetings and gatherings sparingly during the pandemic, in compliance with local public health recommendations. As the director

of the staff, I aspire to put everyone in a position to thrive professionally, and to have our team function at the highest level it possibly can. While I know our staff would dutifully support the conference in the capacity they were asked to, I also know that doing so would put them in a position where they could incur health risks that were not essential to the service of their job. To put it bluntly, I am not comfortable putting our staff in that position given the current omicron surge.

Agency attendance is another consideration. Though current health precautions differ among our agency partners, based on what I have learned from DATCP, DNR, Extension, and NRCS, agency representation at an in-person conference would be significantly reduced from what we would typically expect (some are projected to have zero attendance, at this point). Like our county members, many agency staff are speakers whom we have lined up for presentations, which would create logistical and scheduling challenges.

Other organizations with conferences around the same time as ours have had to make similar difficult decisions as the one we are grappling with. While some have opted at this point to pursue in-person conferences, others have cancelled, gone virtual, or are assessing doing so. There is not much consolation in knowing that the marquee events of fellow organizations like ours are also in limbo.

A decision to hold a virtual conference, especially after doing so in 2021, is certainly not without ramifications for our organization. We are very aware that many counties have been conducting business in person for months now, “virtual burnout” is real, and there is great desire to get back to “normal,” including with WI Land+Water events. Should we decide to go virtual, it is my great hope that our valued county members are sympathetic to this challenging situation, and understand that it is not a decision we take lightly, nor would come to without great deliberation.

There will inevitably be financial ramifications of a decision to go virtual, as well, and we should expect that we will incur some facility expenses from Chula Vista Resort this year. However, WI Land+Water staff have been actively communicating with Chula Vista staff to explore our options, and they have shown a willingness to work with us to arrive at a favorable financial outcome for both parties. This would likely entail us rebooking a conference with them at a future date—2026 is the soonest this could happen—and providing a deposit on the event.

Given the circumstances we are facing, and the factors I hope I have laid out here, it is hard for me envision how we can meet the normal high bar of the WI Land+Water Annual Conference via an in-person event this March, which is why I recommend that we make the difficult decision to go virtual. Doing so would allow us the certainty of an endpoint we can plan toward no matter what happens with the pandemic over the next two months, and will allow our staff and committee members to focus our collective talent and energy toward putting on another high-value WI Land+Water conference. If the Committee approves this recommendation, I am optimistic that this event will contribute to continuing to advance our county conservation community forward, in service of our mission.