

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 139

“Resolve, Directing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Establish a Pilot Program for the Electronic Tagging of Deer.”

SPONSORED BY: Senator BAILEY of York

**CO-SPONSORED BY: Senator BALDACCI of Penobscot,
Senator HICKMAN of Kennebec,
Senator NANGLE of Cumberland,
Senator TIPPING of Penobscot ,
Representative CLUCHEY of Bowdoinham,
Representative EATON of Deer Isle,
Representative TERRY of Gorham,
Representative WEBB of Durham**

DATE OF HEARING: January 27, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Nate Webb, Wildlife Division Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in support of **L.D. 139**.

This bill directs the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to establish a pilot program for electronic registration for harvested deer and to submit a report regarding the pilot program to the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife no later than December 3, 2025. The bill also authorizes the committee to report out a bill based on the report from the Department during the Second Regular Session.

Knowledge of the number of animals harvested each year is critical for monitoring the status of big game populations. Data collected during harvest registrations are used to inform annual evaluations of population status, and ultimately derive management recommendations, including setting season dates, bag limits, and permit numbers. Traditionally, this information has been collected at in-person registration stations that are often associated with small local businesses. There have been several advantages to in-person registration, including efficient collection of additional biological data that is used to inform species management systems, registration station attendants report dozens of violations to the Department every year, and we believe the requirement to physically take an animal to a registration station is a major disincentive to providing incorrect information.

The Department has made significant efforts over the past few years to modernize our registration system, including collecting data through a web-based form and providing real-time information on harvest levels on our website. Additionally, in 2023 the Department initiated the option to self-report harvest of wild turkey, through a link on the Department website. Since implementation, about 72% of turkey hunters have chosen the option to self-report their harvest. As we understand this bill language, it directs the Department to develop a plan and timeline to implement a pilot program for a similar self-reporting tool for deer.

The Department recognizes that many hunters would experience benefits from a self-reporting tool for deer and the Department is generally supportive of developing a pilot program to evaluate the effectiveness of such a system. However, there are a variety of factors that will need to be considered prior to implementation. In states that have implemented self-reporting for big-game registrations, most have reported some reduction in compliance with registering harvested animals. This lack of reporting can have a significant impact on enforcement and biological data collection; therefore, the Department may need to employ new strategies to affect enforcement and collect biological data, such as mandatory roadside check stations during busy weekends. Biological data collection would be particularly challenging in northern Maine where there is a lack of meat processors and most of our biological data are collected at in-person registration stations by station agents. Transitioning to online self-reporting of deer will also result in a period of lower confidence in harvest trend data as we move to a new system.

We also believe that providing a self-reporting option for deer could have financial impacts on our current in-person registration stations, many of which are small businesses that appreciate the business that hunters bring to their stores. If this program is implemented many in-person stations may choose to no longer participate. Additionally, the Department would need to pay for technical support for a self-reporting system, which would include database management, customer support, and likely an additional staff position dedicated to managing this program specifically. These factors would all need to be considered prior to implementing the new system.

In closing, I want to clarify that although we feel it is reasonable for the Department to develop a *plan* for a pilot program to implement self-reporting for deer registration by December 2025, we would not be able to *implement* that program until fall 2026. There are numerous technical, computer programming, and financial considerations that would need to be addressed prior to actual implementation. While there would be some growing pains and challenges associated with this effort, we are confident that the timing is good with a national trend towards online self-reporting and a thriving deer population in most of Maine. I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.