



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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To the Joint Standing Committee on Education, co-chairs Senator Rafferty and Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the committee, I offer my thanks for taking the time to allow me to introduce LD 543, "An Act to Enhance Maine's Wildlife Conservation Efforts and Preserve Maine's Sporting Heritage by Requiring Hunter Safety Education in Schools". The bill's concept involves a nuanced relationship of education, legislation, and conservation dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that has made the U.S., and Maine, a world leader in wildlife conservation and habitat management. My name is Donny Ardell, and I represent House District 6.

Maine is renowned for its sporting opportunities. But that reputation was earned, and was not always the case; in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, wildlife habitat depletion, largely through mechanized farming and irresponsible forestry techniques, put Maine's once-abundant wildlife in severe decline, with fear of some species, such as moose, disappearing altogether. Congress understood that and in 1937, the *Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act*, 16 USC 669, commonly known as the *Pittman-Robertson Act*, was enacted. *Pittman-Robertson* redirected an existing 11% federal excise tax on the wholesale price of shotguns, rifles, and ammunition, and a 10% tax on handguns, to U.S. states for conservation efforts such as wildlife management, habitat improvement, and hunter education. After the excise tax has been collected, *Pittman-Robertson* funds are allocated to U.S. states via the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, in part through matching funds provided as grants for state-managed wildlife restoration projects. State buy-in to those projects eligible for the grants can be as low as 25%, with *Pittman-Robertson* funds fulfilling the remaining 75%, creating a 3:1 ratio of federal to state funds. Those state funds used to access *Pittman-Robertson* allocations are typically sourced through hunting license fees paid to the state, as well as fees on tags for additional game opportunities or game species, such as antlerless deer tags or tagging fees. Through this allocation method, any given U.S. state is limited to no more than 5% and no less than one half of 1% of total *Pittman-Robertson* allocations, which last year were \$1.4 Billion. That's a lot to take in, but the main takeaway is that any given U.S. State's access to critical wildlife conservation funds hinge on sportsmen and women buying licenses.

By way of example, in 2025 Maine is scheduled to receive over \$10.3M in *Pittman-Robertson* apportionments, with \$1.56M allotted for annual hunter education (attached).

However, those license sales are dropping as a rate of Maine's population; with fewer licensed hunters, Maine loses the ability to access that matching *Pittman-Robertson* funding for wildlife conservation, and loses funding to acquire and manage critical wildlife habitat to other states.

The Maine Hunter Safety Course is necessary training to be able to acquire a license as a 16-year-old or older, and when passed is valid for life. The course covers numerous topics such as concepts of habitat and modern wildlife conservation, survival/first aid, landowner

relations, hunter ethics, Maine hunting laws, hands-on practice of safe firearms handling with non-firing replica arms, hands-on instruction of map and compass orienteering skills and outdoor survival, and information about game species biology and ecology. While some of the information is hunting-specific, much, or even most of it is necessary to know in an emergency, or to avoid being in an emergency in the first place. Best of all, the course certification never expires and is valid for life. In fact, I knew a college professor who had taken the course as a youth, and never used it until in her 50s she became an avid upland bird hunter after rescuing a bird dog who needed the exercise.

The classroom materials are published, and there's a provision for much of it to be optionally conducted online or through workbook-style training. The safety course materials are funded through the very *Pittman-Robertson Act* matching funds that the license fees are able to unlock, and trained instructors already exist. From someone who volunteered to fill in full-day blocks of applied constitutional law presentations to Houlton High students, I can say the teachers wouldn't mind the break. Teaching the course in schools is a small investment that can provide big conservation payoffs for Maine overall.

But I ask myself the question: 'Do schools really need to be mandated to teach something else?' and, 'What is the role of local control?' The answers are that this is more than just another mandate: this is a first step, with a lifetime ticket in-hand, to engaging in Maine's natural world with an informed and conservationally-grounded mindset. It is a ticket so valuable it both protects and enhances our natural resources while providing the holder a lifetime challenge that can, if you're patient, good, and lucky, provide clean, free-range table fare for your friends and family, or for food pantries through the 'Hunters for the Hungry' program. And all that is aside from the friendships forged, and the thrill of engaging Maine's natural beauty away from a screen.

In closing, education about conservation, the Maine Hunter Safety Course, and the associated federal funding that it is both funded by and provides access to, is a program in its eighty-eighth year that has reintroduced the wild turkey and allowed Maine's moose to thrive. It's a feedback loop of education, engagement, and funding that is in danger of losing steam in Maine. Making the course a part of Maine's school curriculum strengthens a critical part of that relationship, and provides an opportunity, a golden ticket, for a lifetime of challenge and natural engagement in Maine's forests

Thank you for your time, and careful consideration of this bill.

Sincerely,



Donald J. Ardell  
State Representative

