

TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND FISHERIES AND
WILDLIFE

IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 439

**“An Act to Preserve Maine’s Sporting Heritage and Enhance Sporting
Opportunities for Maine’s youth by Allowing Maine’s Youth to Hunt on Sunday”**

SPONSORED BY: Representative Ardell of Monticello

DATE OF HEARING: March 3, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Judith Camuso, Commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in opposition to L.D. 439 An Act to Preserve Maine’s Sporting Heritage and Enhance Sporting Opportunities for Maine’s youth by Allowing Maine’s Youth to Hunt on Sunday.

While this bill aims to expand opportunities for youth deer hunters, which the Department supports, it also permits Sunday hunting, which we cannot support.

Youth are a key focus for the agency in providing opportunities to learn about and participate in hunting, fishing, and trapping. Last year, this committee passed a law permanently extending youth deer hunting opportunities from one day to two, each fall. These youth-only deer hunting days take place on Friday and Saturday before the start of the firearms deer hunting season. In addition to these designated deer hunting days, other laws establish additional special youth hunting days, including one day for bear hunting, three days for waterfowl, and one day each for spring and fall turkey hunting.

Each year, the Department provides scholarships to approximately 400 children to attend conservation programs that teach hunter education and shooting sports and provides equipment and resources to several partnering organizations who offer youth-oriented hunting and shooting sports programs.

In addition to providing opportunities specifically for youth hunting, the Department is dedicated to outreach and education efforts that recruit and support new participants in hunting, fishing, and trapping. Research at the national and regional levels shows that individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 are the most likely to adopt new outdoor activities. Recognizing this, the Department actively engages this group by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to become successful hunters, trappers, and anglers. By fostering a new generation of confident and capable hunters, the Department helps ensure that these young adults will pass down their skills and experiences to their children and other youth in their communities, keeping the hunting

tradition alive for future generations.

The Department also works to identify the many barriers that prevent both youth and young adults from participating in hunting, fishing, and trapping and develops resources and opportunities to help overcome these challenges. While lack of time is one obstacle for new hunters, other significant barriers include proficiency with firearms or archery equipment, access to hunting areas, social support and mentorship, and the skills and knowledge needed to participate safely and responsibly. To help both new and seasoned hunters overcome these challenges, the Department offers a variety of workshops and training sessions through its advanced hunter education program and at our shooting ranges. These programs and workshops have over 10,000 participants each year.

Additionally, the Department develops resources to help all hunters find places to hunt and offers guidance on accessing both public and private land for outdoor recreation. To further support newcomers, the Department also manages a mentorship program that connects experienced hunters with beginners, providing valuable social support, skill-building opportunities, and increased confidence in their hunting abilities.

As I mentioned earlier, the Department is committed to offering opportunities that recruit and support youth and young adults in becoming hunters, but we cannot support legislation that would allow hunting on Sundays.

During the first regular session of the 130th Legislature in 2021, two bills related to Sunday hunting, LD 1212 and LD 1033, were introduced to the IFW Committee. LD 1212 proposed allowing Sunday hunting in the northern portion of the state, while LD 1033 sought to permit Sunday hunting on private property with the landowner's written permission. Sunday hunting has been a longstanding and often contentious issue, generating debate for many years. In fact, some form of Sunday hunting legislation has been introduced in nearly every legislative session.

The Department testified in opposition to both of these most recent bills, maintaining concern that some landowners may close their property to hunting and other recreational activities if any form of Sunday hunting were made legal. While the agency realizes there could be potential for economic growth and additional opportunities for hunters, at the same time, we recognize that many landowners prefer to have Sunday as a day that they can enjoy their land and allow others an opportunity to recreate.

The Department understands and respects the concerns of private landowners. With more than 90% of Maine's land privately owned, outdoor recreational opportunities and the Department's ability to manage wildlife populations rely heavily on the support and generosity of these landowners. Our staff, particularly those in the Landowner Relations Program, are dedicated to addressing landowner needs, and we take great pride in the strong relationships we have built with many landowners across the state.

Rather than passing the proposed bills as written, the Legislature enacted LD 1033 as a Resolve, directing the Department to convene a stakeholder group with broad

representation across various interests and geographic regions to evaluate all aspects of Sunday hunting in Maine. The group was also tasked with developing and conducting a survey—pending sufficient outside funding—to assess public sentiment on the issue. The Department was then required to report the stakeholder group’s findings and recommendations to this Committee, which was authorized to introduce a bill related to Sunday hunting during the 130th Legislative Session.

To fulfill this directive, the stakeholder group was formed, and a neutral third party was hired to facilitate discussions. Two in-person meetings and four virtual meetings via Zoom were held between early September and December 2021, with opportunities for the public to listen and provide comments at the conclusion of each session. Additionally, the private research firm Responsive Management was contracted to develop a formal, scientific survey in collaboration with the stakeholder group. Members provided direct input on key issues and contributed to the development of survey questions, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of public opinion on Sunday hunting in Maine.

We would like to offer a small overview of the results of the survey on Sunday hunting in Maine for those here that were not a part of the discussion in the last few years.

The key question in the survey, support for or opposition to allowing Sunday hunting in Maine, was asked early in the questionnaire before additional information was provided over the course of the survey.

- About a third of the general population (34%) support Sunday hunting, while a majority (54%) oppose.
- Over two thirds of hunters (69%) support, compared to 23% who oppose.
- A third of North/East and Central Region landowners (33% each) support Sunday hunting, while 62% and 61%, respectively, oppose. Opposition is very high among South Region landowners, with only 13% who support and most (81%) who oppose.

Landowners were asked, if Sunday hunting were allowed, if they would be more likely to allow hunting access, more likely to restrict access, or more likely to allow the same level of access. Of particular interest are those who currently allow hunting access but would be more restrictive.

- Looking at the landowner sample, 44% of those in the sample who do not currently post their land say they would be more likely to restrict access to hunting on their land if Sunday hunting were allowed.

The scientifically conducted survey reveals a wide range of opinions on Sunday hunting. However, it also clearly highlights a significant risk of losing access to private lands if Sunday hunting is permitted in Maine. This access is a unique privilege that both residents and non-residents have valued as part of the state’s hunting heritage for generations.

I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.