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Testimony of Tom Doak  
Executive Director  
Maine Woodland Owners  
In Opposition LD 439

Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, my name is Tom Doak, I am the Executive Director of Maine Woodland Owners speaking today in strong opposition to LD 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"

This bill represents the 78<sup>th</sup> Sunday hunting bill that the Legislature has considered. All have failed. Some of the early attempts to pass Sunday hunting were an outright repeal of the prohibition on hunting on Sunday. When it was clear an outright repeal would never pass, the strategy turned to attempting to pass Sunday hunting in piecemeal form and then once enacted keep trying to build on it.

And here we are again today, with more of the same attempts, to legalize Sunday hunting by incremental measure.

The bill before you is not a new idea; it has been proposed a number of times.

With 78 previous attempts, there has been a lot of variety in the bills. Here are a few: Sundays with dogs, small game after noon on Sunday, Maine residents only, non-residents only, youth days, the first Sunday after the first Saturday, upland and migratory birds, first Sunday before the first Saturday, LURC (LUPC) jurisdiction only, north of the east-west highway, night hunting for coyotes, coyotes only, landowner's own land,

landowners' own land and friends, Sunday hunting with an increase in license fees, and coyotes in northern Maine. There are many more.

### **A Comprehensive Sunday Hunting Survey of the Public, Landowners, and Hunters in Maine**

In 2021, the Maine Legislature, at the urging of this Committee, directed that a comprehensive survey of the Sunday hunting issue be undertaken. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife hired an independent, internationally recognized survey firm with expertise in natural resource issues to conduct that survey at a cost of \$71,000 dollars. As part of that work, the department created a broad stakeholder group (which included three members of this Committee at the time) to help develop the survey, and held six meetings of the group with the survey team coordinated by an outside facilitator. At the final meeting, no member of the stakeholder group voiced concern about the questions or content of the survey.

The result was a meticulous, comprehensive 135-page survey of the general public, landowners, and hunters regarding Sunday hunting. That survey, released in 2022, showed that:

- The majority of landowners oppose Sunday hunting in any form.
- The majority the general public oppose Sunday hunting in any form.
- The survey also showed that hunters are not in favor of Sunday hunting if it results in loss of access to private land. It showed that there would be significant loss of access to private land, not just for hunting, but for other uses, if Sunday hunting was enacted.

These findings were backed up by a letter sent to Commissioner Camuso from the Landowners and Sportsmen Relations Advisory Board (LSRAB). The LSRAB is statutorily created and is comprised equally of landowners and land users “to advise the Commissioner on landowner-related laws, rules, department policies and other significant landowner and land user issues”. Regarding the survey, the Board stated:

“The board feels that the survey conducted (at significant cost) by Responsive Management provides a comprehensive overview of stakeholders in this issue, based on a representative sample of both landowners and land users from throughout the state. This survey indicates that a majority of landowners in all regions of the state do not favor Sunday hunting. It concerns the board that a majority of landowners indicated that they would respond to a law permitting Sunday hunting by restricting access to their land for hunters and other recreational users. The board notes that a majority of hunter respondents indicated they are not in favor of Sunday hunting if permitting Sunday hunting would lead to restricted access on private land. These results echo previous research related to this issue, and they support the opposition to Sunday hunting that has long been perceived by groups representing hunters and landowners in Maine. Given these survey results, the LSRAB does not see any indication of majority support for Sunday hunting.”

### **The Findings of the Survey**

The impact of Sunday hunting is not just about hunting, it is also about other users as well, and the survey spells those out clearly:

- Among the landowner sample surveyed, 24% of those who always allow public access said they would be more likely to restrict access for activities other than hunting (such as hiking, ATV trail-riding and snowmobiling) if Sunday hunting were allowed. Additionally, 19% of those who often allow public access and 22% of those who sometimes do, said they would be more likely to restrict access as well.
- Half of Maine residents said if Sunday hunting passes it would decrease their participation in outdoor recreation.
- The survey showed that “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.”

### **Survey Findings Specific to Youth Hunting**

The 2022 survey also addressed the very question of youth hunting on Sunday. A clear majority of hunters, the public, and landowners all opposed this idea. Here are the results:

- Landowners:
  - 75% opposed/ 20% in favor North/East
  - 71% opposed/24% in favor Central
  - 93% opposed/3% in favor South
- Public:
  - 62% opposed/28% in favor
- Hunters:
  - 44% opposed/ 35% in favor

One of the arguments for allowing youth hunting on Sunday is that many hunters work or have children or grandchildren in school activities on Saturday, so they need the opportunity to hunt on Sunday. Organized youth activities routinely occur on Sunday and just as many woodlot owners work on Saturday or attend school activities with their children as well.

### **Maine Has a Long History of Landowners Sharing Their Land with the Public**

Through a lot of hard work by a lot of people and organizations, we have something really special here in Maine. Despite having the highest percentage of private land of any state in the country, there is no state where access to private land is greater than in Maine. There is no place where access is more available to everyone, not just those who can pay, not just to those who own land. This didn't just happen by good luck or accident.

Let's be clear. Allowing people to hunt, or access your land for any reason, is rarely if ever a benefit for a landowner. Frankly, it is often a negative. The majority of landowners allow hunting and public access, because they believe it is the right thing to do. But, there are limits and these repeated attempts to force something on landowners that the majority have repeatedly said they do not want, is fueling a growing resentment among landowners.

### **Avoiding Red Lines**

In Maine, we have avoided two red lines: one for land users; one for landowners. The red line for land users, particularly for hunters, is not being required to get landowner permission for access. The red line for landowners has been keeping Sunday the one day per week they feel they can fully enjoy their own land.

## **Hunting Opportunities Have Greatly Increased Over the Years**

So, what has avoiding these red lines done for Maine, particularly for hunting? Hunting used to start October 1<sup>st</sup> for game birds; deer hunting started the first of November and ended the Saturday after Thanksgiving. That was pretty much the hunting season in Maine.

Hunters have benefitted greatly from the willingness of landowners to accept and support expanded hunting opportunities. We now have spring and fall turkey hunting; a special muzzle loader season for deer, which started as use of a primitive gun but has now turned into hunting with a single shot rifle; multiple youth hunting days; archery season, which begins in September; crossbows are now legal and more recently have been allowed during the regular archery season that starts October 1<sup>st</sup>; bonus deer permits; year round coyote hunting; 8 1/2 months of coyote hunting at night; a southern Maine moose hunt; changing the start of partridge (ruffed grouse) hunting season from October to September so people could fish and hunt the same day (most fishing ends September 30<sup>th</sup>), and many others. Not to mention that this past deer season resulted in the largest deer kill in Maine history. At the same time, we now have the largest snowmobile network east of the Mississippi and more than 6,000 miles of ATV trails.

This all occurs without hunters having to pay for access or having to get landowner permission. Hunters have benefitted greatly from the willingness of landowners to allow continued and expanded hunting opportunities. So, what has been the benefits to landowners? Frankly, very little, if any.

There are 313 days of hunting in Maine (6 days a week, 52 weeks a year) and extended night hunting. Ninety percent of the land in Maine is privately owned, and the majority of land is open and available for hunting - for free. No requirement to get landowner permission. In fact, the burden falls entirely on the landowner if the landowner wants to limit access. Landowners are willingly allowing hunting and all other outdoor recreation uses and have supported new hunting opportunities. But, those same landowners and farmers have made it clear over the past attempts to pass some form of Sunday hunting that they strongly oppose Sunday hunting. The clear majority want a day to be left alone; they want a day they don't have to dress up in orange; they want that one day a week to fully enjoy their land. That is not too much to ask.

We now have an extensive survey of Maine people regarding Sunday hunting. We know: Maine residents do not want Sunday hunting; we know Maine landowners do not want Sunday hunting; we know Maine hunters do not want Sunday hunting if means loss of access; and we know that significant loss of access for hunting and other public uses of private land will occur if Sunday hunting passes.

After 77 failed attempts to pass some form of Sunday hunting over the wishes of Maine people, and a failed lawsuit tying Sunday hunting to the right to food, it is time to stop.

Enough is enough.