

**LD 1532, "An Act to Expand the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
Outdoor Education Programs to Schools and Communities"**

Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

April 16, 2025

Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife:

I am Trey Stewart; and I represent Senate District 2, which includes several communities in Penobscot and Aroostook Counties and home to the best white-tailed deer and partridge hunting in our great state. I am here today to present LD 1532, "An Act to Expand the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Outdoor Education Programs to Schools and Communities." This measure would establish a pilot program at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) and the Department of Education (DOE) for hunters' safety and education at Maine secondary schools to be hosted at regional sporting clubs that wish to participate.

For many of us, Fall is an incredibly busy time – increasingly busy in the even-numbered years! As I've become more involved in the Legislature, I've come to cherish the three to four days per year that I am able to spend riding the roads around Portage Lake and Ashland, hoping to bag a few woods chickens before dark. For those of you that live south of Augusta, woods chickens is Aroostook County talk for partridge or ruffed grouse!

So what I'm really trying to get at with this bill is to provide more access to in-person hunters' safety for kids that might not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy that experience. If there are folks on this Committee or in the audience that are not familiar with this course, you've got to have a hunter's safety certificate before you get an adult hunting license at 16. For folks in northern Maine, this experience is something you might equate to your drivers ed class. I still remember the classroom at Presque Isle High School where I took hunter's education with my brother. I remember the instructor and I remember my buddies that took the class with us.

I am glad there is an option for folks to complete their hunter's safety requirement online, but I don't think this is an either/or where we need to do anything to limit that option. I am concerned that limiting access to in-person hunters' safety classes for young people creates a bit of a class system whereas only those with means to send their kids to conservation camp or another costly program would gain the kind of exposure that my brother and I, and thousands of Maine kids,

had taking an in-person hunters' safety class, learning how to handle and fire a rifle for the first time and getting hands-on instruction on how to behave in the Maine woods. In Aroostook County we are taught to respect firearms and that your rifle is a tool. For a lot of families in my district, the ability to fill the freezer with one hundred pounds of venison or bear meat can take a lot of pressure off the grocery bill. If this bill might create a few hundred more hunters each year, then I think we will have done some good bipartisan work for Maine's future hunters and their families.

The devil is always in the details, so let's get to how this program might function. IF&W and Sportsman's Alliance of Maine would work with interested high schools to offer this class as an elective at a partner organization, not unlike the way our high schools currently cooperate with the network of Maine technical schools. I believe with this pilot program we could reinvigorate Maine kids to get off their iPads and out in the woods, at least in the Fall, so that they may enjoy that same experience of sitting in a treestand waiting for first light or riding old logging roads well outside of cell phone service in search of unsuspecting grouse.

Sportsmen and women are eager to impart their knowledge and enthusiasm for the outdoors and our natural resources. Expanding these programs is a win-win situation for students, who may then earn school credits, and the State of Maine, who will gain young stewards of our environment and outdoor heritage.

Thank you for your time and attention and I would appreciate your thoughtful consideration.