



Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, Institute for Legislative Action (SAM-ILA)

205 Church Hill Road, Augusta, ME 04330

david@samofmaine.org

207-623-4589

www.samila.org

April 16, 2025

The honorable Senator Baldacci, Rep. Roberts, and distinguished members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee, David Trahan, the Executive Director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine Institute for Legislative Action, (SAM-ILA) in Support of L.D. 1532, *An Act to Expand the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, (IFW) Outdoor Education Programs to Schools and Communities,*

First, thank you Senator Stewart for sponsoring this SAM ILA bill request.

Just after the 2014 failed citizen referendum to ban Bear Baiting, Hounding and Trapping, the SAM-ILA introduced legislation to increase the hunting license fee by \$1 and dedicate the funding for education programs at the Department. At the same time, there were major changes to the mandatory hunter education program in the works. For several years, this new education funding went generally underutilized, until the mandatory hunter education program was repealed and replaced with a new on-line program.

Although our organization and many Fish and Game Clubs opposed this change, we asked the Commissioner to collaborate with us to create new hands-on education programs. Working with the Recreational Safety Division Director at the time, Mike Sawyer, and Ron Fournier, who ran the University of Maine 4-H program at Bryant Pond, I offered both leaders the opportunity to use our Augusta facility for educational programs. They both embraced the opportunity and held many classes in and outside of our building.

After a donation of land next to our facility, we began building a state-of-the-art outdoor education center here in Augusta. Building off a one-time donation of forty acres of undeveloped land, we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars building ranges, ponds, trails, and classroom spaces. The site is now 140 acres featuring multiple classroom spaces, two fishing ponds, archery and rifle ranges, miles of trails and learning sites throughout.

Two years ago, IFW entered into a pilot program and formal lease agreement with The Sportsman's Alliance of Maine (SAM) and now uses the facility in a unique partnership that allows us to host any programs the Department offers and provide the center for other youth and beginner programs.

As a former lawmaker and now SAM Director, I learned very quickly that firearms, hunting, and trapping, when conducted in schools, may be controversial and can in many cases be a distraction from the life-enhancing value of hands-on outdoor education. Often, schools will reject any discussion of a firearm used in a class, even if it is disabled and inoperable.

Eight years ago, we decided to invest in building a satellite education center on our property, designed to remove barriers to outdoor education. This new model, developed with IFW instructors, trained in all disciplines, allows the department staff to tailor programs for any school district or community group, including first-time hunters, trappers, etc. Programs can be designed within the user's comfort and skill level. Some aspects of the program can be taught in the school and the more controversial components at a satellite facility like ours. Such an approach tears down the walls that divide us and creates a safe path for anyone interested in learning.

Working with the new ambitious Recreational Safety Supervisor, Ron Fournier, and the Commissioner's office, this new education model has quickly expanded to two other rural locations and under this legislation could expand to more urban areas in southern Maine, where it is desperately needed. We partner with 65 Fish and Game Clubs; most are eager to be part of this emerging educational opportunity. Many have similar resources to those available at our facility.

What has happened in the last two years under this partnership, is that a new interactive, flexible education program has taken shape and is poised to break out into a successful statewide program. There are several modifications that we believe must occur for the program to expand.

First, a formal budget that supports expansion over the next ten years, and annual reports for the committee. One dollar on the hunting license will not cut it for long. We would support an amendment to this bill to add another dedicated dollar to the hunting license to get started.

Second, a detailed budget from the department, which includes estimated funding for three more regional satellite sites. This could include similar arrangements with clubs and schools, making sure it is clear this program is not restricted to schools, but remain open to anyone who wants to participate.

Third, survey Fish and Game Club's interest in training instructors to help the department in implementing educational programs and possibly hands-on mentoring as well.

Fourth, explore making some IFW classes electives, so that students that decide to take part may earn credit.

Finally, this bill is designed to be inclusive and optional, not mandatory for students or schools. It continues building on the momentum that was started in the last few years, to expand outdoor education, in way that tears down barriers.

Thank you,

David Trahan, Executive Director
Sportsman's Alliance of Maine Institute for Legislative Action