

LD 1737 Testimony

Good afternoon. My name is Travis Cutler. I own Cozy Cove Cabins in Jackman, Maine and I am a registered Maine Guide. I am here today to testify in opposition of LD 1737.

When my wife and I bought our small business in 2023, our license with DHHS was for lodging only. One of our first goals was to get the property licensed as a Commercial Sporting Camp so we would be eligible for the Outfitter Tag drawing. We invested a lot of time and money into making the necessary upgrades to qualify for the change of license. Throughout our first year in business we completely renovated the lodge and got licensed as a sporting camp.

2024 presented challenges for our business, as well as many other lodging businesses throughout the state. Outdoor recreation is the primary reason people come to Jackman. The winter of 2023-2024 was particularly short with very little snow. Generally speaking January, February, and March are good months for us. Between snowmobiling and ice fishing our cabins are consistently booked. A busy winter is crucial to get us through the off season, otherwise known as mud season. In April and May we have very little money coming in and we are doing our big projects that can only be done when the cabins are empty. In February and March of 2024 we had many cancellations due to lack of snow and poor ice conditions on the lake. This put us in a very difficult situation heading into the off season.

Fortunately we were drawn for a 2024 lodge tag. We were able to sell the tag and guided hunt in March. The income from this sale made up for much of the revenue lost because of the bad winter. The lodge tag program was designed to be an economic boost for small businesses like mine and the communities they are in. The program worked exactly as it was designed in this situation.

LD 1747 opens the door to making it more difficult for businesses like mine to benefit from the lodge tag program. The language in this bill is very vague, and leaves too many things up to interpretation of a DHHS health inspector. Some of the issues I will point out may or may not relate to my business necessarily, but I believe they are a problem nonetheless.

2-C. Section B. Has a caretaker present on site or nearby; - This is a prime example of vague language. There is no clear definition of what "nearby" means.

2-C. Section C. Does not operate primarily to serve day visitors; - Does this include businesses that in addition to lodging and outfitting operate a restaurant? Or sell fuel? This is unnecessary language when it comes to "ensuring the future of Maine's sporting camp heritage."

2-C Section D. Is not a hotel, motel, bed and breakfast, campground, children's camp or educational camp or a housekeeping cabin that is not qualified to serve meals; - There are several sporting camps that operate campgrounds and motel style lodging in addition to their sporting camp operations. The language in this section jeopardizes the license status of these outfits.

2-C Section G. Is authorized to collect sales tax pursuant to Title 36 - Collecting sales tax is irrelevant. Sporting camps collect lodging taxes as well as prepared foods tax. Is this bill suggesting a sporting camp will have to collect sales tax on services? Having language that is not relevant adds confusion to an already extensive licensing process.

2-C Section H. Does not primarily solicit reservations on electronic platforms for short-term rentals. - This is another example of irrelevant language. The sporting camp industry is a difficult industry to succeed in. Platforms like Airbnb and VRBO are simply tools for business owners to fill their cabins and lodges. There are also platforms like Hunt Nation and Hunt Vault that are online marketplaces for guided hunts. I see no difference between booking your cabins on Airbnb and booking hunts on Hunt Nation. In no way does taking tools away from sporting camp owners help "ensure the future of Maine's sporting camp heritage. On the contrary, I believe it jeopardizes the future of Maine's sporting camps by making it more difficult to fill their rooms.

2-C Section F. Is not organized as a nonprofit organization; - There are several non profits that would be directly affected by this language. First is Moose Maine Kids, a non profit that takes kids on guided trips at no charge. Moose Maine Kids was started to get kids more interested in the outdoors. Taking kids on a guided hunt gives them a much higher chance for success. For many kids, being successful is what keeps them interested in the outdoors. Additionally, Moose Maine Kids has the Dream Adventure Program. Moose Maine Kids takes critically ill kids from Maine on fully guided trips. Last year, I guided a young man recovering from leukemia on a week long moose hunt. I also helped out on another dream adventure where we took a young man on a dream fishing trip. These two trips were authentic sporting camp experiences for the kids. Giving sick kids an opportunity to participate in the unique experience of a Maine sporting camp is something I am very grateful to be able to do. The outfitter tag program is the primary fundraiser for Moose Maine Kids. Taking away the ability to qualify for the outfitter tag program would be devastating. Ensuring the future of Maine's sporting camp heritage means preserving the experience for everyone, whether someone is a paying customer or a kid with a life threatening illness.

Another non profit that comes to mind is Operation Reboot Outdoors. Reboot takes veterans on guided trips all over the state at no cost. Excluding Reboot from the outfitter tag program would be taking away a crucial fundraising tool from an organization that provides a great service for our veterans and the community.

I want to believe that this bill was written with the intention of preserving an industry that is a big part of Maine's history. Unfortunately the language in this bill will do more harm than good.