

**TESTIMONY OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE  
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND  
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE  
IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 1213**

**“An Act To Provide the Option of Online or Telephonic Tagging of Harvested Big Game Animals”**

**Presented by** Representative MARTIN of Sinclair.

**DATE OF HEARING: April 21, 2021**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative Landry and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Jim Connolly, Resource Management Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking in opposition to **L.D. 1213**.

This bill requires the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to prescribe a form and content of bear, deer, moose and wild turkey registration to include the use of a computer, telephone or mobile electronic device in lieu of presenting the animal at a tagging station for registration and to provide a person using this system a unique registration number to attach to the animal in lieu of a seal.

The Department relies on in-person registration of deer, bear, moose, and turkey to determine the number of each species harvested by hunters. This information is used to inform management recommendations, including setting season dates, bag limits, and permit numbers. Although some states allow harvests to be reported electronically or by phone, the current system used in Maine has several significant advantages over a system that relies on self-reporting.

Data Quality

Requiring in-person registration of deer, bear, moose, and turkey by tagging agents results in improved accuracy compared a system that relies on self-reporting. The current system allows us to determine harvest with nearly perfect accuracy all the way down to the town level. States that rely on hunters to self-report their harvests have estimated compliance to be as low as 45% in some cases and must conduct follow-up surveys to estimate the non-compliance rate and correct harvest estimates. We conducted a survey to estimate the wild turkey harvest in spring 2020 when tagging was suspended due to the pandemic. The survey cost \$30,000, and in WMD 2, the harvest estimate was more than an order of magnitude different than previous years and had be thrown out due to inaccuracy. In contrast, our current system, which essentially serves as a complete, real-

time record of legal harvest, allows the Department staff to make management recommendations with more confidence than would be the case if harvest data were estimated. In some cases, this allows us to provide hunting opportunities that would not be offered if the data were less reliable. For example, our new turkey management system is based on a mark-recapture analysis of harvested birds. If harvest reporting compliance was only 60% in a particular WMD, our turkey population estimate for that WMD would only be 60% of the true number. This would have a direct and proportional impact on our ability to allocate hunter opportunity in that WMD.

### Enforcement

The Department's current registration system also has several enforcement-related benefits compared to a self-reporting system. By requiring hunters to present their animal to a tagging agent for registration, we believe the current system prevents some individuals from undertaking illegal activities or from providing false information during the registration process. Although difficult to quantify, we believe that more individuals would choose to violate the law if they were not required to have a 3<sup>rd</sup> party review and verify their information. In addition, as agents of the Department, tagging station attendees report dozens of potential violations to Warden Service every year; these would go undetected if hunters could self-report.

### Collection of Biological Samples

Requiring in-person registration of harvested animals allows the Department to work with our network of tagging agents to collect biological samples. This would not be possible with a system that relied on self-reporting. Currently, tagging agents collect teeth from bears and deer, teeth, ovaries and tick counts from moose, and bands, tags, and radio transmitters from all four species. All this information is critical to our management programs and contributes to the Department's ability to provide as much hunting opportunity as possible while ensuring that populations of these species remain healthy. As an example, I know that many committee members are familiar with our long-running work to monitor the state's bear population. We have tagged thousands of bears over the past 40 years. Requiring in-person registration ensures that we know the fate of virtually every single tagged bear that is legally harvested by hunters and can use this information to determine harvest rates and estimate population size. Our annual allocation of moose hunting permits, as well as our broader understanding of the health of Maine's moose population, is based in part on the biological data (weights, antler measurements, ovaries and tick counts) collected at tagging stations. In contrast, some states that allow self-reporting either forgo collection of biological data completely or go to great lengths and significant expense to collect biological data through mandatory hunter check-stops or other similar approaches. We have heard that at least one state that implemented online tagging for deer in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is now considering going back to mandatory in-person tagging because of an inability to collect enough biological samples.

The Department has made significant strides over the past few years to modernize our registration system, including collecting data through a web-based form and providing real-time information on harvest levels on our website. Tagging stations are constantly

reviewed and strategically located to minimize driving distance for hunters. Many small businesses, especially those in rural parts of the state, appreciate the additional business that hunters bring to their stores. Although some other states have successfully implemented a self-reporting system to estimate harvest levels, many of these states have significantly higher harvest levels than Maine and are therefore less reliant on precise data. Other states often express how envious they are of our tagging system and the unparalleled information it provides on game harvests. Many states that allow self-reporting for some species still require in-person reporting for species with harvest levels more similar to Maine. We believe the current system in Maine is the gold-standard and allows the Department to do the best job possible in managing our wildlife.

If this bill were to pass as written, we believe it would have drastic consequences for our ability to effectively manage big game in Maine and could reduce opportunity for hunters. Maine would become the only state in northern New England that allows self-reporting for bear or moose. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in hunter fees and thousands of hours of staff time to develop, refine and implement big game management systems that are predicated on our current system of in-person tagging and the associated biological samples. We currently have ongoing, multi-year research contracts with the University of Maine, Cornell University, and Washington State University totaling over \$430,000 to develop new, world-class management systems for turkey and bear. Both efforts are the result of an extensive public consultation process and are indicated as a high priority on our Big Game Plan. They are based on the use of an in-person registration system for these species.

In our view, this bill would upend the management programs for Maine's big game, and would have numerous significant unintended consequences. Rather than move forward with the bill at this time, we would implore the committee to give us time to thoroughly review this proposal and develop a report outlining the financial, logistical, and ecological implications of moving to a self-reporting system for big game.

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