

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 116

LD TITLE: “An Act To Allow the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife To Authorize the Hunting of Antlerless Deer without a Permit in Certain Areas”

PRESENTED BY: Representative LANDRY of Farmington.

DATE OF HEARING: February 7, 2022

Good afternoon Senator Dill, Representative Landry and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Nathan Bieber, Deer Specialist for IFW, speaking on behalf of the Department in support of **L.D. 116**.

In the first Regular Session of the 130th Maine Legislature, L.D. 116 was presented and intended to provide a means of increasing doe harvest in areas of the state where we’ve most struggled to achieve desired levels of doe harvest using Any-deer Permits (ADP). Two other bills were brought forward that related to our antlerless deer permit system as well. In response to these bills, the Committee requested that the Department conduct a review of the antlerless deer permit system and work with a group of stakeholders to develop recommendations for how to improve that system. The Committee also asked that the group review ways to use the deer permit system to generate revenue to be used for the acquisition and management of deer wintering habitat.

During the internal review and stakeholder process, we developed a list of recommendations that we felt would improve our ability to meet doe harvest objectives, provide fair and equitable access to antlerless harvest opportunity, not negatively impact buck hunting opportunity, not create major shifts in hunter effort, improve our ability to recruit and retain deer hunters, and generate revenue for deer wintering habitat acquisition and management. Implementing these recommendations will require change to Maine statute as well as Department rules and policy and will also be closely entwined with concurrent efforts to review and revise statutes related to crossbow hunting and to review our system for registering big game species. The required statutory changes are now presented in this version of L.D. 116 and will be the first step towards a significant change to our system for allocating antlerless harvest opportunity.

This bill proposes that the Commissioner of IFW be granted the authority to designate certain wildlife management districts (WMDs) as open to either-sex hunting with a regular hunting license. This will provide antlerless harvest opportunity to hunters in some WMDs without requiring them to participate in the permit lottery, which we believe will be a very simple and accessible way to allow antlerless harvest in WMDs where the issuance of permits alone is insufficient in allowing us to achieve desired levels of doe harvest. We anticipate utilizing this authority only if the other recommended changes are not sufficient to achieve doe harvest goals.

This bill also proposes a fee for antlerless permits, which will be distributed via a one-round lottery, and that permits remaining after this lottery be made available for sale to any interested hunter. Revenue would be deposited into the Deer Management Fund to be used in efforts to acquire and manage deer wintering habitat, primarily in northern Maine. While imposition of a fee may deter some hunters from applying for permits, we do not believe we will have difficulty distributing the permits that are allocated, and we believe that the hunters that are most interested in harvesting antlerless deer will less likely be deterred by this change. Charging a fee for something that was previously free will always be contentious, but in time and with increased education about the disposition of fee revenue and further examples of properties we've been able to acquire and that are being managed for wintering deer and public use, many hunters will come to embrace the change as a positive step towards improving our ability to carry deer through the winter in parts of the state that are currently struggling and provide public land access opportunities. We also strongly believe that it is necessary and appropriate to attach a fee to a permit that allows for the take of a second animal. Finally, it's important to note that the Department previously charged a \$12 fee for bonus antlerless deer permits until 2018, so although some hunters are now used to receiving these permits for free, this has only been the case for the past 4 years.

This bill proposes the elimination of transfers and swaps of deer permits. This change will alleviate significant administrative and law enforcement burdens associated with processing permit transfers and swaps and maintaining current records of which hunters hold permits. This would also eliminate the ability of hunters to use transfers and swaps to accumulate more permits than they are likely to use. Although this change would remove the option to transfer permits to youth, the lottery would retain the current provision of 25% of permits for youth. We will also seek greater flexibility to allow the harvest of antlerless deer on Youth Day, which will initially be used to allow antlerless harvest without a permit statewide on Youth Day. While not a primary motivation for this change, eliminating swaps and transfers may prove to greatly simplify development of systems for electronic self-reporting of harvested big game animals, which we are currently reviewing.

Finally, the bill proposes adjusting the threshold for issuing Superpack permits in a WMD from 3,500 permits to 2,000 and repealing the sunset clause associated with the crossbow legislation, Public Law 2019 Chapter 98. We believe these changes will provide consistency to hunters, particularly as we move forward with a more comprehensive review of crossbow-related statutes in the coming years.

In addition to those changes to statute presented in L.D. 116, we will pursue several changes through rulemaking. These include changing permits to allow the take of an additional antlerless deer instead of the current system in which ADPs allow the take of a doe instead of a buck; changes to antlerless harvest allowances during the regular archery and Youth Day seasons; and a decrease to the number of areas in which an applicant may apply for a permit.

There are a seemingly endless number of ways to try and address the issues we're facing and improve our ability to meet doe harvest objectives, but we feel that this bill- in tandem with rule and policy changes we'll be pursuing- represents a clear path forward in a direction that will also simplify our permitting system, ensure equitable distribution of antlerless harvest opportunity, and also support efforts to acquire and manage deer wintering habitat.

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