

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

NIETHER FOR NOR AGAINST L.D. 1322

“Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Program to Enhance Youth Hunting Participation”

Presented by Representative ROBERTS of South Berwick.

Cosponsored by Senator GUERIN of Penobscot and Representatives: BRIDGEO of Augusta, CLUCHEY of Bowdoinham, COLLAMORE of Pittsfield, DILL of Old Town, JULIA of Waterville, MASON of Lisbon, MASTRACCIO of Sanford.

DATE OF HEARING: Monday, April 7, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Emily MacCabe, Director of Public Information and Education at Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, neither for nor against L.D. 1322

This resolve directs the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Community Development, Office of Tourism, to establish through department rulemaking a 2-year pilot program, including expanded youth hunting seasons and outreach initiatives, to increase youth participation in hunting. The department is required to report annually to the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over inland fisheries and wildlife matters on the implementation of the pilot program and is authorized to submit legislation based on the pilot program findings after the conclusion of the pilot program.

The Department is committed to fostering the next generation of hunters, conservationists, and outdoor enthusiasts. Engaging youth and families is central to our mission to conserve and enhance Maine’s fish and wildlife resources for the future.

Currently, the Department invests heavily in marketing and communications efforts aimed at engaging new hunters and supporting existing ones, with a particular focus on youth and young adults. Each year, MDIFW develops and distributes targeted campaigns through social media, email, video, and printed materials to promote key hunting opportunities, including youth hunting days and hunter education programs. These efforts are designed not only to raise awareness, but also to reduce barriers to entry by providing clear, accessible information about how to get started. We also actively encourage seasoned hunters to serve as mentors, highlighting the vital role they play in helping new hunters build confidence, skills, and a deeper connection to Maine’s outdoor traditions.

Research consistently shows that social support is one of the most important factors in recruiting and retaining new hunters. Having a mentor or a supportive peer network makes it far more likely that a new hunter will feel comfortable, return for future seasons, and eventually bring others into the fold. In addition to youth, the Department also places growing emphasis on engaging young

adults, recognizing that individuals in this age group are often making independent decisions about how they spend their time and resources, and are actively exploring new interests. By reaching out to both youth and young adults and supporting them with community, mentorship, and information, MDIFW is working to ensure a strong future for hunting in Maine.

The Department is currently partnering with an advertising agency to develop a refreshed, comprehensive marketing campaign aimed at inspiring both residents and visitors to engage in Maine's diverse outdoor recreation opportunities including hunting, fishing, trapping, and wildlife viewing. Over the past year, we've been building the creative assets needed to support this campaign, which is scheduled to formally launch later this year.

At the same time, the Department is undertaking a full redesign of our website, also in collaboration with the advertising agency, with strong emphasis on user experience. The new site, which we aim to launch within the year, will serve as a more effective platform for promoting participation in outdoor recreation and sharing engaging, accessible information about Maine's fish and wildlife conservation efforts.

In addition to its marketing and communications efforts, the Department has a long-standing commitment to providing outreach and education programs that offer youth, families, and individuals hands-on experiences in hunting, trapping, fishing, and shooting sports. These programs are designed to introduce outdoor skills in a safe, supportive environment while building lasting connections to Maine's outdoor heritage. Efforts include partnerships with community organizations to host public events, youth-focused programs like the 4-H Shooting Sports Program, Camp North Woods, and Family Field Days, and scholarships for Maine youth to attend conservation camps, where they can complete hunter safety training and develop outdoor skills. The Department is also working to expand Family Field Day offerings statewide and is identifying outdoor education facilities where regional coordinators can host ongoing programming.

The Department has an extensive range of hunting-related education programs, including both mandatory hunter safety courses and advanced workshops for more experienced hunters. These programs are designed not only to teach the skills needed to hunt safely and responsibly in Maine, but also to foster a culture of lifelong learning and stewardship, encouraging participants to grow as hunters and serve as mentors to others.

MDIFW regularly collaborates with the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), including the Maine Office of Tourism and Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation. These partnerships help us promote Maine's outdoor recreation opportunities, including hunting, in ways that are aligned with both conservation goals and community development efforts.

We are also a supporter and participant in the implementation of Maine's 10-Year Outdoor Recreation Economy Roadmap, which highlights youth engagement, access to the outdoors, and inter-agency collaboration as key pillars for strengthening the state's outdoor economy. The Department sees hunting as a vital part of that larger vision.

As part of the Department's broader efforts to engage new and existing hunters through marketing, education, and outreach, it's important that we continually evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Tracking youth participation in hunting, however, presents unique challenges. For many years, the Department has used junior hunting license sales as a proxy for youth engagement. But that metric no longer tells the full story.

Over the past eight years, junior license sales have declined, while lifetime license sales, which allow youth to hunt without purchasing a new license each year, have steadily increased. This trend makes it difficult to determine how many youth are actively participating in any given year.

Once a lifetime license is issued, the hunter no longer appears in annual sales data, even if they continue to hunt regularly.

As a result, declining junior license sales don't necessarily indicate reduced participation, they may simply reflect a shift in how licenses are acquired. Lifetime license sales tell us who *can* hunt, but not who *actually does*.

The Department has proposed regulatory changes in the past that would require lifetime license holders to activate their license in years they plan to hunt, an approach that would significantly improve our ability to track participation. However, those efforts have not advanced, and we currently cannot rely on license data alone to assess youth hunting activity accurately.

That's why we do our best to take a comprehensive approach, incorporating harvest data, hunter safety course completions, public surveys, research studies, and direct feedback from hunters and families. These broader measures give us a clearer picture of how youth, and adult hunters, are engaging with hunting in Maine and help guide efforts to support and sustain that participation.

The resolve calls for the addition of more youth-only hunting days as part of the pilot program. While the Department supports providing meaningful opportunities for youth hunters, we approach season expansion with caution. Recent data from the Youth Deer Hunt, which was extended from one day to two beginning in 2023, shows mixed results.

In 2024, approximately 31,197 youth were licensed to hunt, and 3,759 deer were harvested, with nearly 48% of those (1,802 deer) taken during the two-day Youth Hunt, split almost evenly between Friday and Saturday. While this marked the highest Youth Hunt harvest on record, only about 6% of youth hunters harvested deer during those two days, and the percentage of the total deer harvest taken by youth has not increased with the additional day.

This suggests that while additional hunting days may improve success for some, they don't necessarily result in a meaningful increase in overall participation. Access, mentorship, and social support remain more influential in sustaining engagement. For that reason, the Department will continue to prioritize those areas and support a data-driven approach when evaluating future changes to season structure.

The Department remains deeply committed to increasing youth participation in hunting and fostering lifelong connections to Maine's natural resources. We welcome opportunities to further collaborate with the Office of Tourism and the Office of Outdoor Recreation to support this shared goal and look forward to working with the Committee and our partners to explore strategies that align with our mission and build on the work already underway.

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