

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

## **IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 1166**

### **“An Act to Allow Sunday Hunting by Landowners on Their Land”**

#### **Presented by Representative HALL of Wilton.**

Cosponsored by Senator BLACK of Franklin and Representatives: COSTAIN of Plymouth, LAVIGNE of Berwick, MORRIS of Turner, PAUL of Winterport.

### **DATE OF HEARING: April 10, 2023**

Good morning Senator LaFountain, Representative Landry and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Judy Camuso, Commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in opposition to **L.D. 1166**.

This bill allows landowners who own land of 5 acres or more to hunt wild animals and wild birds on that property on Sundays. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is directed to establish rules to implement these provisions.

During the first regular session of the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature (2021) two bills were introduced to the IFW Committee, LDs 1212 and 1033. LD 1212 proposed to allow Sunday hunting in the Northern portion of the state while LD 1033 proposed to allow Sunday hunting on private property with written permission of the landowner. The topic of Sunday hunting has been a heated social debate for years and in fact some type of Sunday hunting bill has been proposed nearly every Legislative session.

The Department testified in opposition to both bills maintaining concern that some landowners may close their property to hunting and other recreational activities if any form of Sunday hunting were made legal. While the agency realizes there could be potential for economic growth and additional opportunity to hunters, at the same time, we recognize that many landowners prefer to have Sunday as a day that they can enjoy their land and allow others an opportunity to recreate.

The Department is sensitive to the concerns of private landowners. Maine is more than 90% privately owned, without the support and generosity of our private landowners, our outdoor recreational opportunities and the ability for the Department to manage wildlife populations would be severely limited. Our staff, particularly our Landowner Relations Program are committed and focused on the needs of landowners, and we are proud of the relationship we have built with many of the landowners in Maine.

Instead of passing the bills as written, the Legislature passed LD 1033 as a Resolve and directed the Department to establish a stakeholder group with broad representation in interest and geographics to examine Sunday hunting in Maine. The group was also asked to develop and complete a survey relating to Sunday hunting, if the department received adequate outside funding to pay for the survey. It then directed the department to report the findings and recommendations of the stakeholder group to this

Committee. The committee was authorized to report out a bill related to Sunday hunting during the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislative session.

The stakeholder group was formed, a neutral person was hired to facilitate the 2 in-person meetings and 4 ZOOM meetings that were held from early September through December 2021. Members of the public were able to listen in and provide comment at the end of the meetings Responsive Management, a private research firm was contracted to develop a survey with the stakeholder group. Group members provided direct feedback on the issues discussed and helped develop the questions for the survey.

The survey was conducted by Responsive Management during late December 2021. The following statistics were notable outcomes of some of the survey questions:

**The key question in the survey, support for or opposition to allowing Sunday hunting in Maine, was asked early in the questionnaire before additional information was provided over the course of the survey.**

- About a third of the general population (34%) support Sunday hunting, while a majority (54%) oppose.
- Over two thirds of hunters (69%) support, compared to 23% who oppose.
- A third of North/East and Central Region landowners (33% each) support Sunday hunting, while 62% and 61%, respectively, oppose. Opposition is very high among South Region landowners, with only 13% who support and most (81%) who oppose.

**Landowners were asked, if Sunday hunting were allowed, if they would be more likely to allow hunting access, more likely to restrict access, or more likely to allow the same level of access. Of particular interest are those who currently allow hunting access but would be more restrictive.**

- Looking at the landowner sample, 44% of those in the sample who do not currently post their land say they would be more likely to restrict access to hunting on their land if Sunday hunting were allowed.

The Administration does understand that Sunday hunting could provide economic growth and additional opportunity to hunters. The Department is sensitive to the concerns of private landowners. With Maine being more than 90% privately owned and without the support and generosity of our private landowners, our outdoor recreational opportunities would be severely limited as shown by the survey results.

Currently Saturdays are the Maine Warden Service's busiest days regarding calls for service in the fall (Sept. 1 – December 15). Calls for service on Saturdays are on average a minimum of 61% greater than the other 5 days of the week. We expect another weekend day of hunting would be more like a Saturday and wardens would see significant increase in calls for service.

After speaking with a few states we can offer the following points:

Instituting Sunday hunting affects migratory bird hunting including waterfowl hunting, which is regulated by a framework provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Currently nonhunting Sundays in Maine can be compensated for by adding a hunting day at the end of the season, thereby increasing the overall length of the season. Migration occurs over a period of time and having an extended season allows hunters to access different species and hunting conditions across the state. For this reason, some states have limited Sunday hunting to deer hunting. A shortened season would require the Department

to change the waterfowl seasons as they currently exist. This change is not something that can be instituted immediately and would likely require a year after passage of a bill to coordinate the changes with the USFWS.

The states we spoke with have not documented an increase in harvest as a result of Sunday hunting. Neither have any states documented an overall increase in participation due to Sunday hunting, although some new studies are underway to examine this issue.

Although the department is always looking for ways to support landowners, we stand by the outcome of the Sunday hunting survey results presented to this Committee in 2022. This means that we are not supportive of allowing Sunday hunting in any fashion at the risk of losing opportunity to recreate on private land.