

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST L.D. 261**

“An Act to Reinstate a Minimum Age for Hunting”

SPONSORED BY: Representative STROUT of Harrington

DATE OF HEARING: February 13, 2023

Good morning Senator LaFountain, Representative Landry and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Dan Scott, Colonel of the Maine Warden Service speaking on behalf of the Department, neither for nor against **L.D. 261**.

This bill sets a minimum age of 5 years of age to hunt most game in Maine with an exception for hunting adventure permits for children. This bill does not alter the minimum age to hunt moose in Maine.

Historically, a junior hunter is eligible to hunt when they are at least 10 years of age yet under the age of 16 years old. The junior hunter must be in the presence of a junior hunter supervisor which is defined as the parent, guardian or a person who is 18 years of age or older who is approved by the parent or guardian and currently holds or has held a valid Maine hunting license or has completed a hunting safety course. The junior hunter supervisor is required to have the junior hunter “in the presence of” which means within visual and voice contact without the use of visual or audio enhancement devices to include but not limited to binoculars and radios.

In 2015 this law was amended to allow no minimum age for hunting. Allowing a person under 10 years of age to obtain a junior hunting license and to hunt within 20 feet of a junior hunter supervisor. The junior hunter supervisor must be a parent, or a person approved by a parent, that person being at least 18 years old, has either held a hunting license in the past or has completed hunter education course.

Not all youth that are under age 5 (or 16 for that matter) are at a developmental stage that a responsible parent or guardian may feel they are ready to hunt. This decision needs to be weighed by the responsible parent or guardian. Numerous parents who hunt factor in the individual child’s safe handling of firearms, decision making, proficiency on the range, physical capabilities, and understanding of the respect for the animal being harvested and the role of the hunter in that process before allowing them to hunt. For some children the parents may feel age 8 is appropriate to begin hunting and for others it

could be 10, 12, or more. In some cases, we have had parents or guardians (like me for example) that feel that one of their children may be ready to handle a firearm responsibly at age 8 while another may not be ready until a later age. In the five years since the law has been changed there have been several hunters under 5 years of age who have registered deer.

2018 – 2

2019 – 1

2020 – 5

2021 – 2

2022 – 4

Additionally, between the same time frame (2018-2022) there have been 2 hunters under the age of 5 who have registered bear and 3 hunters under the age of 5 who have registered turkeys.

This decision-making process on the appropriate age to have a youth partake in hunting is vital to the safety of all involved and to promote a positive experience for the youth.

While having this discussion we are most often referring to the responsible and ethical parents or guardians, and not necessarily considering the parents or guardians who read this law, which provides an age and that ends up being the only threshold they use to allow a youth hunter to engage in the activity of hunting. The hunting landscape is ever changing due to development and land access issues. It is necessary that all who care about our hunting tradition consider these factors. A youth hunting on a large parcel of private land that is posted to no other hunters creates more comfort to the adult supervisor as they are the only ones with access to a particular hunting parcel. However, many do not have or cannot afford their own large parcel to limit the risk of encounters with other land users and hunters in their immediate area. Careful consideration into the overall hunting landscape is also critical to these decisions.

As a parent who has raised several hunters, I can say I would not have been comfortable with any of my children taking-on the ethical responsibility to obtain a proper sight-picture and make a clean kill on a deer at the age of 4. Their physical strength, decision making ability and awareness of their responsibility as a hunter was not up to an acceptable level.

In some cases of these very young hunters who have registered deer, I suspect the firearm may be supported and the proper sight-picture acquired by the supervising adult, while the youth merely pulls the trigger. In those cases, we need to weigh if that was the intent of the no age hunting law and the criteria we wish to use to define a hunter.

Allowing children under 5 years of age seems unlikely that they will actually be hunting themselves and unlikely that they understand the seriousness of appropriate gun handling and what it means to harvest an animal.

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