

**TESTIMONY OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE  
  
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND FISHERIES AND  
WILDLIFE  
  
IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 1692**

**“An Act Regarding Antlerless Deer Permits for Certain Agricultural Landowners”**

Presented by Representative TUELL of East Machias.

**DATE OF HEARING: April 28, 2025**

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Nate Webb, Wildlife Division Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in opposition to **L.D. 1692**.

This bill allows a landowner that qualifies to hunt without a license on certain land to be issued one antlerless deer permit at no cost.

We recognize the very important role that landowners play in ensuring land access for hunting and other recreation and currently offer many unique benefits to landowners. These benefits include a priority landowner category in the antlerless deer permit lottery, the ability to hunt without a license in some situations, access to Department programs that assist with land use, access, and enforcement issues, and technical assistance with land and wildlife management on their properties. Currently, landowners may hunt their own property without a license if it is 10 or more acres, they are legally domiciled on the property, and it is used for agricultural purposes. A bill (LD 27) was proposed earlier this session that would remove the requirement that the land be used for agricultural purposes, and historically, this statute has been loosely interpreted to include any land growing trees as one used for “agricultural purposes.” As such, this bill would provide that all landowners with 10 or more acres and that are legally domiciled on the property would be eligible for a free antlerless deer permit, not just owners of agricultural lands.

Although the language is straightforward, we have several questions regarding the intent of this bill, including:

- whether the Department would be required to provide a free permit to all qualifying landowners, even in Wildlife Management Districts where the number of applicants exceed the number of available permits,
- whether a landowner must allow public access to their property to be eligible for a free permit,
- whether only one or multiple members of the household domiciled on the property would be eligible for free permits,

- whether a landowner would be eligible for a free permit in any WMD, only the WMD where their property is located, or if the permit would only be valid on their own qualifying property.
- whether the intent is to allow qualifying landowners to also receive a second permit through the lottery, including in WMDs where there are more applicants than available permits.

We also want to point out that strict enforcement of a law resulting from this bill would be very difficult and impractical. The Department would have to rely largely on the honor system as it would not be possible to verify every claim that a hunter is a qualifying landowner. Since the bill specifies that the person must own at least 10 acres of land instead of the 25 acres that is required to be eligible for the landowner category in the antlerless deer permit lottery, we suspect that the number of qualifying individuals would be in the tens of thousands.

The Department is currently developing a Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), which will provide free antlerless deer permits to qualifying landowners with 10 or more acres that can demonstrate loss of income due to deer damage to crops, orchards, or nursery trees. Landowners that receive DMAP permits may use the permits themselves or distribute them to other hunters to remove antlerless deer from the impacted properties during the regulated hunting seasons. If the intent of this bill is to provide additional and free deer removal options to agricultural landowners, then DMAP permits will address many of these same concerns and will be available to qualifying landowners in the near future.

Similar to other bills that waive the fee for antlerless deer permits, this bill would result in a negative fiscal impact of \$12 per permit issued to qualifying landowners. These funds would otherwise have been deposited into the Deer Management Fund and used to match federal and other state funds in efforts to acquire and manage deer habitat, particularly deer wintering habitat.

In closing, we want to reiterate that the Department is very interested in providing additional support to landowners. However, we are opposed to any changes to the deer permit system, including a waiver of fees, that would reduce our ability to effectively manage the state's deer population. Our antlerless deer permit system was deliberately and thoughtfully redesigned just 3 years ago at the request of the Legislature. Since that time there have been several bills that would erode the integrity of the deer permit system and result in many of the same challenges that made the previous system ineffective. Rather than move forward with this bill or others that would negatively impact the ability of the Department to manage the state's deer population, we encourage the Committee to consider some alternative options for supporting landowners. We would be happy to review some of these ideas during the work session.

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