

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2003 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 337 (Delegate Elliott, *et al.*)
Environmental Matters

Deer Hunting - Length of Firearms Season

This bill increases the length of the deer firearms season to 21 days.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill is not expected to significantly affect State operations or finances.

Local Effect: The bill would not directly affect local government operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: Potential meaningful.

Analysis

Current Law: The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) establishes the open season to hunt forest and upland game birds and mammals by regulation each year. DNR may adopt regulations to enlarge, extend, restrict, or prohibit hunting wildlife. Except for specified persons, hunting game birds or mammals on Sundays is prohibited. There are three seasons to hunt deer in Maryland: (1) deer bow hunting season; (2) deer firearms season; and (3) deer muzzle loader season. DNR currently manages deer harvest on a region-by-region basis. During the 2002-2003 season, the deer firearms season ranged from 14 to 16 days depending on the region.

Background: DNR estimates the white-tailed deer population at nearly 300,000, which is triple the amount of the State's carrying capacity. If not controlled, this population will soon double. Such a dramatic increase is closely associated with a decrease in the

number of natural predators. Moreover, recent suburban development has created an “edge” habitat where deer not only thrive but hunter access is reduced.

Resulting from this spiked population growth is a marked increase in the number of human-deer conflicts. For example, the reported number of deer-vehicle collisions per year has more than doubled since 1990; over 4,300 automobile accidents that led to deer fatalities were reported in 2001. DNR conservatively estimates the property damage resulting from deer-vehicle collisions to be in excess of \$9.7 million annually. Deer also cause substantial damage to crops and vegetation; in 1996 this damage was estimated at almost \$38 million. Although exact figures regarding current damage amounts are unavailable, it is widely held that the amount of agricultural damage caused by deer is consistently on the rise. Finally, public health experts believe that the increased deer population density has significantly contributed to the increased incidence of Lyme disease; in the decade between 1988 and 1998, the number of reported cases jumped from 12 to 423.

In addition to the impact of deer overabundance on humans, numerous research studies have documented negative ecological impacts on native vegetation and other species. White-tailed deer in protected forest areas have been shown to lower vegetation density and cause significant shifts in the composition and abundance of bird communities, including migratory bird populations. Additionally, research has shown that 15 mammalian species, including raccoons, squirrels, and skunks, may be affected by the increased populations of deer.

In response to these concerns, legislation was passed during the 2002 session to increase the deer harvest by expanding the firearms season from 13 days to at least 21 days. In seven counties, the first Sunday of the season was to be included in this longer season. Because the first Saturday of the season annually accounts for approximately 35% of the total firearms harvest, the addition of the first Sunday of the season was viewed as the strategy most likely to maximize the harvest. Also included was an increased harvest in urban management regions in which deer overpopulation constitutes a nuisance or presents public health or safety issues. This measure was, however, vetoed by Governor Glendening.

Small Business Effect: By expanding the deer firearms season, the bill could result in an increase in revenues for small businesses in Maryland. A 1996 report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that Maryland deer hunting resulted in \$40.4 million in retail sales in the State. The projected impact on the State’s economy totaled \$76.4 million.

In addition to businesses affected by hunting, the bill could also affect several other types of businesses. Most farms are small businesses. A 1996 study by the University of

Maryland found that grain farmers suffered crop losses of \$38 million annually due to deer. To the extent that the bill reduces crop damage, farmers will benefit. The bill could also affect vehicle owners and businesses involved in the repair of vehicles. Reported deer-vehicle collisions in Maryland doubled from 1988 to 1996. Property damage related to those collisions was estimated in 1998 at over \$9.7 million annually. Property owners and businesses could also be affected to the extent that the bill reduces damage to ornamental shrubs and gardens.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: HB 9 of 2002, among other things, would have increased the deer firearms season to at least 21 days. The bill passed the Senate and the House with amendments but was vetoed by the Governor.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Department of Natural Resources, Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 13, 2003
ncs/jr

Analysis by: Lesley Frymier

Direct Inquiries to:
(410) 946-5510
(301) 970-5510