



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Bill: HB 594
Committee: House Environment and Transportation
Position: Oppose
Date: February 10, 2021

Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

On behalf of our Maryland members and supporters, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) opposes HB594, which would legalize bounty payments to hunters who harvest deer and donate them to local foodbanks. This bill is a dangerous departure from well-established wildlife management principles, a potential health threat to people receiving support at foodbanks and will not resolve the underlying concerns with deer populations.

Violates established wildlife management practices

HSUS joins with wildlife management professionals and sportsmen's groups in opposing this legislation, as it contravenes longstanding conservation principles by creating direct payments to hunters for taking what is, has been, and must always be a public resource that is managed in the public trust. While HSUS does not oppose the existing tax credit program, it is critical to understand that that the program pays for tangible expenses associated with the donation of deer – primarily the cost of processing the deer. HB 594 fundamentally and dangerously alters this paradigm by legalizing bounty payments for the deer.

Deer are wildlife, not livestock. As wildlife, deer belong to all Marylanders by virtue of the public trust doctrine, the principle that mandates governments to hold our natural assets—of which wildlife is one—in trust for present and future generations. HB 594 commercializes wildlife and their slaughter in violation of the public trust doctrine and in violation of wildlife management principles that are used throughout the Northeast region.

Dangerous policy for people

HSUS is sensitive to the need to find low-cost protein alternatives during our current economic crisis and the importance of programs that provide critical nutrition for families in need. But by incentivizing the harvesting of deer to stock pantries at food banks, this bill also creates a serious risk to human health. These tax credit based deer-donation programs are not covered under any of the USDA or MDA health inspection rules. As the tax credit program currently stands, the trust is placed in hunters that they are being selective and safe in how they harvest deer for donation to a food bank. By creating a bounty per deer that is donated, this bill risks opening this program to deer that are unsafe for consumption. Deer could be brought in that were found as roadkill or died from disease; they could be hunted illegally or even killed through poaching, creating risks to landowners and livestock.

This legislation also exposes people receiving services at food banks to a real risk of lead poisoning, a concern that has not been adequately addressed even with the existing tax credit program. Lead-shot meat is at risk for lead contamination and without oversight that employs X-ray inspection or chemical analysis, the extent of lead contamination in donated meat is unknown. Lead bullets fragment and spread aggressively through tissue, and that lead will find its way into the bodies of Maryland's citizens and other species. The deleterious effects of lead in the human body are well-documented, not the least of which are cognitive and behavioral dysfunctions in children, a quadrupled chance of a miscarriage in pregnant women and, even in small amounts, increased risk of chronic kidney and cardiovascular diseases. Wildlife jeopardized by the ingestion of lead in their prey include, but are certainly not limited to, bald eagles and other native carnivores essential to the health of our ecosystems.

Will not address the underlying issues

HSUS understands that this bill is also motivated by a desire to accelerate deer management and population control efforts in urbanizing counties, including Anne Arundel and Montgomery. However, commercializing our public resources is not an effective or appropriate way to address those concerns. Deer hunting opportunities have been expanding in our urbanizing counties for years, but deer populations continue to grow in these counties. Providing bounties in an effort to further incentivize deer harvest is not the solution, it is repeating the same behavior and expecting different results.

Ultimately, as deer management throughout the Northeast region has shown, we cannot hunt our way to lower population numbers. These counties need to consider creative solutions to take on conflicts with deer that farmers and other stakeholders are experiencing, including tax credits to install deer fencing, barriers, and deterrents to help protect crops from browsing, as well as other targeted and strategic conflict mitigation tools that focus on reducing conflicts not populations. We support these counties working with DNR to create more comprehensive, humane and effective deer management plans and are happy to participate in those conversations to provide additional resources and solutions.

Please reject HB 594

HB 594 is fundamentally threatening to humans and to wildlife and disregards the responsibility governments have to hold our wildlife in trust. We therefore ask for an unfavorable report on HB 594. Thank you.

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