

TO: Sen. Paul Pinsky and the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
2 West
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
RE: Opposition to SB 497

Dear Chairman Pinsky and Committee Members,

I write today to oppose Senate Bill 497. This bill would allow farmers who lease state land the ability to obtain crop damage permits for lands they lease from the State, which would allow them to kill deer both during and outside of the established deer season. This is inappropriate for the reasons I will describe below.

Farmers who lease land from the State bid on the parcel and choose to avail themselves of the land that we as citizens of the State collectively own. Under the Public Trust Doctrine, the deer that utilize that land are held in trust by the State for the use and enjoyment of all citizens. Many of these parcels of leased State land are contiguous with public hunting land. This means that members of the public would be trying to hunt the very deer that the farmers would be killing under the crop damage permit. Furthermore, crop damage permits allow farmers and their permittees to use firearms year-round in some counties, while regular hunters only have a two week firearm season in late November-early December, in addition to a couple of days in January (for the eastern 2/3rds of the state). Additional legislation is also being considered that would allow these permit holders to hunt deer at night. The number of deer a farmer may kill under the permit is often in excess of the seasonal limits established by the Department of Natural Resources. Hunting on public land is already difficult for hunters. Allowing farmers the ability to kill deer on these lands year-round and in excess of what would otherwise would be allowed, with weapon types that would otherwise be prohibited by the general public at those times would make the already difficult feat of killing deer on public land almost impossible on those tracts which are adjacent to leased fields. These deer are already incredibly pressured, as the lands are open for all licensed hunters to hunt, but to allow firearm hunting for these deer year round would completely destroy the value of these lands to the hunting public. Even in places where firearms wouldn't be allowed year-round, the additional pressure caused by hunting year-round on these permits would still cause hardship to public land hunters.

I understand and sympathize with farmers who suffer economic damages because of the deer that frequent the property, but a more appropriate solution would be for farmers to bid lower prices for these State lands because they know they will suffer crop losses that they cannot mitigate in the same manner as a farmer who owned his own farm or leased private ground. Please do not punish the hunters of the State by making the already difficult task of successfully harvesting local, free-range meat for our families from public land nearly impossible. For these reasons, I oppose SB 497 and ask that you grant an unfavorable report.

Sincerely,

Jacob Holtz