



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

March 8, 2023

Senator Brian Feldman
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Subject: OPPOSE SB 779 – Female Deer Hunting Contests

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Committee,

The Humane Society of the United States, and our Maryland supporters, urge you to oppose SB779/HB934, which would amend the ban on wildlife killing contests (§10-427) to allow a person to sponsor, conduct or participate in a contest that has the objective of killing a female deer. Organized contests to kill deer for cash and prizes are cruel, unsporting, and scientifically unfounded.

The current ban on killing contests already does not apply to deer—it applies only to coyote, fox and raccoon—and does not prohibit “big buck” contests or deer hunting. Big buck contests are very different from killing contests, where the smallest, largest or most animals are killed in competitive events for cash and prizes. As The Wildlife Society explains:

“Killing contests differ from typical regulated hunting by the very nature of the organized public competition and prizes being given specifically for killing the largest, smallest, or most animals. “Big Buck” pools or organized record books differ from killing contests because the animals recognized in these competitions are harvested consistent with ordinary and generally accepted hunting practices and then introduced to the competition.”¹

A. Wildlife killing contests are a bloodsport similar to dogfighting or cockfighting, which Maryland has already banned.

This activity is counter to Marylanders’ humane values and to the spirit and intent of the ban on killing contests that residents and most legislators supported in 2021. During killing contests, participants mass kill animals and then gather to weigh and count the bodies, take photos next to the bloody animals, and celebrate. These contests promote gratuitous violence, and send the message that killing is fun, animals are disposable, and life is cheap. The very nature of these events—in which participants are motivated by financial rewards to kill as many animals as allowed over a designated time period—increases the likelihood that participants will fail to abide by the rules and values embraced by responsible hunters. During these events animals may suffer injuries that can take days or weeks to succumb to, even indirectly due to starvation, predation or exposure.

Killing contest participants display an utter lack of respect for the animals they kill. Photos plastered on social media show contestants grinning next to piles of bloodied animals and showing off their prizes. The animals are carelessly thrown into heaps, with their guts often spilling out and the ground covered in a thick layer of blood, piled into trucks, and hung upside down from railings and barn walls, apparently to

show off the massive number of animals killed. Such behaviors demonstrate a lack of respect for wildlife and serve to undermine the reputation of responsible hunters.

B. The best available science does not support deer killing contests.

Indiscriminate lethal control in the form of wildlife killing contests disrupts wildlife populations, disturbs ecosystem balance, and creates wildlife conflicts. Proponents of deer killing contests may argue incorrectly that killing is necessary to reduce deer overpopulation, protect ornamental trees, shrubs and gardens, prevent deer/car collisions, protect parks and wooded areas from “over browsing” and biodiversity loss, and reduce Lyme disease.

1. Indiscriminately killing deer will not keep deer numbers down.

Deer are highly prolific, and their high reproductive rate can quickly compensate for declines in their population. When deer numbers are reduced after killing programs, the remaining female deer will often respond to greater food abundance by giving birth to twins or triplets. Fawns also have higher survival rates and earlier onset of sexual maturity. The end result is a quick “bounce-back” in numbers. To be successful, a killing program must not only significantly reduce the deer herd, it must sustain enough pressure to prevent this bounce-back effect, while also preventing deer from the surrounding area from wandering in. All of this usually poses an insurmountable challenge in most urban and suburban communities.

2. Indiscriminately killing deer for cash and prizes will not protect Maryland gardens or crops.

Killing deer will not resolve people’s conflicts with deer in their gardens. Certain plants like tulips and hostas are irresistible to deer. Even if the deer population could be brought to a very low level, these top-choice flowers would still be eaten by any remaining deer. That’s why effective solutions focus on deterring deer and protecting flowers and ornamentals rather than trying to shoot every deer that may come along and eat them.

The key to success is for residents to understand that deer are here to stay. Once homeowners overcome their initial resistance and take steps to protect valued plants, “deer-proofing” will quickly become a normal part of life in deer country.

3. Indiscriminately killing deer will not stop deer/car accidents.

One of the most distressing results of human encroachment into deer habitat is the frequency of deer/auto collisions. Killing deer will not solve the underlying problem, which is that we have trapped these animals within a network of highways crisscrossing their territory and have failed to construct wildlife underpasses or overpasses that allow safe crossings.

Studies have shown that reducing the deer population does not necessarily reduce the number of collisions between cars and deer. In some cases, collision numbers are actually lower in areas with more deer. Many factors contribute to deer-vehicle collisions, such as traffic volume, speed limits, the extent to which roads bisect habits and migration routes and the use of visual barriers. This is why reducing the number of deer alone does not work to reduce vehicle collisions with deer.

4. Indiscriminately killing deer is not the solution to forest regeneration.

It is easy to point the finger at deer and blame them for our forest regeneration woes, yet the reality is that our ecosystem issues are fraught with complexity and subject to human aesthetic preferences

which are often not grounded in any sort of biological reality. Nature is not static. A forest floor once carpeted with wildflowers can rapidly transition into another state as a result of forest succession. Certain plant species are shaded out as trees mature and the forest canopy closes. Later succession stages are, by their very nature, less diverse. Forests are subject to many influences that affect their growth, some less visible than others. Arbitrarily killing deer isn't likely to bring back the type of forest people may want to see.

5. Indiscriminately killing deer will not reduce the incidence of Lyme disease.

Scientific studies and health authorities have demonstrated that killing deer won't reduce people's risk of contracting Lyme disease. The tick that spreads the disease, the black-legged tick (or deer tick), feeds on many different hosts—almost all mammals, most songbirds and even lizards. Killing deer does not reduce the risk of contracting Lyme disease because deer kills do not significantly reduce the tick population. In a study from Great Island, Mass., where up to 70 % of the deer were removed, there was no marked reduction in the tick abundance.

The black-legged tick is very adaptable. Where deer are scarce, the ticks switch to other hosts or congregate in higher numbers on the remaining deer. Deer killing programs have little effect on the tick population—and don't reduce human disease risk. Better alternatives include using products like 4-Posters and Damminix Tick Tubes to lower the tick population as well as taking proper precautions to avoid contact with ticks.

6. Nonlethal solutions are the best way to reduce conflicts with deer.

Communities should first do objective public surveys to define and assess the nature, scope and location of the particular deer problem so solutions can be tailored to particular sites. Then a community should develop a comprehensive plan using applicable non-lethal methods, along with setting up a robust data collection and evaluation system to monitor if deer damage mitigation strategies are achieving set goals and adapt the programs accordingly.

C. Allowing deer killing contests would be an abdication of the State's solemn duty to protect the public's wildlife for all residents.

Marylanders have already spoken: they do not support killing contests. And a national poll taken by Remington Research Group in January 2022 found that 80% of Americans oppose wildlife killing contests.² Motivation for hunting affects public support for it. The *American Attitudes Towards Hunting, Fishing, Sport Shooting, and Trapping 2019* report by the National Shooting Sports Foundation found that, while 84% of survey respondents supported hunting for meat, only 29% supported hunting for a trophy.³ It is likely that support for killing contests is even less than it is for trophy hunting. Very few Marylanders engage in hunting (only 1.9% of Maryland residents were paid hunting license holders in 2021)⁴ and the portion of those hunters who participate in contests is miniscule. Wildlife belongs and is important to all Maryland citizens—not just the very small percentage of people who participate in this activity.

Americans, including Marylanders, increasingly care about wildlife. A keystone study, the *America's Wildlife Values* project, has documented a substantial shift in public attitudes away from a traditional view of wildlife—a view of human mastery over wildlife and that wildlife should be managed for human benefit—and toward a mutualist view of wildlife, or the belief that humans and wildlife should coexist and that the welfare of animals is important.⁵ The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies and the Wildlife Management Institute have noted these studies and underscored the need for state wildlife management

agencies to appeal to a broader constituency to ensure that wildlife agencies remain influential in the future.⁶

Wildlife killing contest participants often try to vilify wildlife species targeted in these events in order to justify the contests, but current social science studies show that the majority of the public does not share these views about wildlife.⁷ Other studies, including the *Nature of Americans Report*, have found that Americans express broad interest in nature, believe connecting with nature is important, and want to conserve wildlife species and their habitats.⁸

D. The state should not allow deer killing contests.

As outlined above, it is well-established that wildlife killing contests in Maryland do not achieve any science-based wildlife management objective. In fact, these events are counterproductive to sound science. Killing contests are held for the sole purpose of killing animals for entertainment and the chance at cash and prizes. Killing contests are incompatible with Maryland's values of sportsmanship, good stewardship, and respect for wildlife. Allowing a small group of individuals to engage in this senseless waste of life violates the State's duty to responsibly manage the State's wildlife in trust for all Marylanders. The science and significant public outrage against these events, which only continues to grow, cannot be ignored.

For the aforementioned reasons, we respectfully urge you to oppose this legislation. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Bevan-Dangel
Maryland State Director

¹ "Issue Statement: Wildlife Killing Contests," The Wildlife Society (Mar. 2019), https://wildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TWS_IS_WildlifeKillingContest_ApprovedMarch2019.pdf

² National Public Opinion, January 2022, Remington Research Group, <https://www.humanesociety.org/sites/default/files/docs/National-Public-Opinion-011022-condensed.pdf>

³ "American Attitudes Towards Hunting, Fishing, Sport Shooting, and Trapping," Responsive Management and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (2019), p. 14, https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/7715/5733/7920/NSSF_2019_Attitudes_Survey_Report.pdf

⁴ The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Historical Hunting License Data for 2020 at <https://www.fws.gov/wsfrprograms/Subpages/LicenseInfo/Hunting.htm>

⁵ Manfredo, M.J., Sullivan, L., Don Carlos, A.A., Dietsch, A.M., Teel, T.L., Bright, A.D., & Bruskotter, J. (2018). *America's Wildlife Values: The Social Context of Wildlife Management in the U.S.* National report from the research project entitled "America's Wildlife Values." Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University, Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources. <https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/wildlifevalues/wp-content/uploads/sites/124/2019/01/AWV-National-Final-Report.pdf>

⁶ The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies and the Wildlife Management Institute: *The Fish and Wildlife Agency Relevance Roadmap (v1.0); Enhanced Conservation Through Broader Engagement*. September 2019 at https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/2515/7547/9977/Fish_Wildlife_Relevancy_Roadmap_Final_12-04-19-lowres.pdf

⁷ George, Kelly A., Kristina M. Slagle, Robyn S. Wilson, Steven J. Moeller and Jeremy T. Bruskotter. 2016. Changes in attitudes toward animals in the United States from 1978 to 2014. *Biological Conservation* 201:237-242. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320716302774>

⁸ Kellert, S.R., Case, D.J., Escher, D., Witter, D.J., Mikels-Carrasco, J., Seng, P.T. April 2017. The Nature of Americans: National Report. https://natureofamericans.org/sites/default/files/reports/Nature-of-Americans_National_Report_1.3_4-26-17.pdf