

## Rachel Dawson Favorable Testimony - HB0983

### Maryland State House Environment and Transportation Committee

Friday, March 3rd, 2023

Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Rachel Dawson and I'm currently a resident of southern Anne Arundel County, but I was born on Deal Island in Somerset County and raised all over the Delmarva Peninsula. For more than three decades, I've been an avid hunter, angler, and general outdoors enthusiast. I'm also a career conservation professional, member of a variety of conservation organizations, and volunteer as a hunter safety instructor – but I'm writing today in support of HB983 as a private citizen.

For the last five years, I've been a volunteer mentor for the First Shot program here in Maryland, which is a partnership between DNR, U.S Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wild Turkey Federation. Of all my outdoor pursuits, this is by far the most meaningful. I've been honored to help connect more than a dozen people from a wide variety of backgrounds and all corners of the state with nature in a totally new way for them. I've gotten to see firsthand the look of awe in their eyes the first time they hear a turkey gobble or the way they freeze when a deer steps out in front of them. I've helped them through the planning, the hunt, and everything that comes after. I've celebrated their successes and helped them learn from the inevitable mistakes. I've watched them gain immeasurable confidence. I'm lucky to be a part of it and it has made me a better outdoorsperson.

People come to hunting for all sorts of reasons. Some want to spend more time outside. Others want to feed their families or know more about where their food comes from. Many want to challenge themselves in new ways. And there's no shortage of interest in hunting; during the pandemic, the demand for hunter safety classes was through the roof. **Unfortunately, many new hunters immediately encounter an opportunity barrier and I've seen how hard it can be for them to stick with it -- whether it's places to go, resources for learning and improving, or just time to go afield. HB983 will help with all that.** More resources for hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) mean we can support Marylanders throughout their hunting journeys, especially those in underserved communities. And more Sunday hunting opportunities are a matter of equity for folks who only have the weekends. And if we can bring and keep hunters afield, it's an economic benefit to Maryland's rural communities and a funding win for conservation.

As a lifelong hunter, it is easy for me to say how important these investments are, so it may be more compelling to read the experiences of two new hunters who have been through the mentored hunt program:

*"The First Shot Mentored deer hunt not only helped me learn to hunt, it introduced me to a wonderful mentor who I consider to be a friend for life. As a recently divorced woman, I wanted to learn to how to hunt so I could provide food for myself and my daughter but I didn't know where to start. This program provided everything I needed for a successful hunt with my mentor. If this program did not exist, I would have never learned to hunt because I didn't have the confidence and I would not have had the opportunity to meet a wonderful group of supportive people. The program is more than learning to hunt,*

*it is about learning about Maryland's great outdoors and building relationships with people you probably wouldn't meet in your regular day-to-day life. It's a wonderful program and I hope it continues to exist in the future.” – Tasha, Dorchester County*

*“Having not grown up in a hunting family I had to get creative with finding ways to learn the skillset beyond just taking Hunter Safety. Lucky for me I live in Maryland where the DNR takes educating newcomers several steps beyond the basics. In 2019 I stumbled upon some information online that ultimately led me to an invaluable mentorship connection in 2021, without which I would never have had the confidence to head afield on my own as I have been frequently doing since. It’s very hard to concisely explain just how much learning from my mentor and her peers has done for me, but it has been nothing short of life-changing. My perception and priorities in the outdoors are completely changed. Every experience gives me something to go home and think about and reframes my approach to conservation and the evolving ways we need to respect our environment and the species we’re so lucky to pursue out there. I cannot imagine where I’d be without this aspect of my life, which my mentorship fostered and nurtured to where it is today- grateful isn’t a big enough word!” – Ashley, Prince George’s County*

With numbers of hunters declining and people becoming increasingly disconnected from the outdoors, now is the time to commit to meaningful steps toward outdoor equity and opportunity for folks like Ashley and Tasha and all Marylanders. Thank you for considering HB983 as a means to do just that.