



Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Josh Kurtz, Acting Secretary
Allan Fisher, Deputy Secretary

March 3, 2023

Bill Number: House Bill 983 – First Reader

Short Title: Hunting, Wildlife Conservation, and Outdoor Recreation - Funding, Promotion, Management, Licenses, Permits, and Stamps

Department's Position: SUPPORT

Explanation of Department's Position

The Department supports HB 983 because it offers a multi-faceted approach that will enable the Wildlife & Heritage Service (WHS) to allocate more resources to the conservation and management of Maryland's wildlife. The legislation will enable WHS to better reach urban and suburban communities to educate them about the value of the state's natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities, it will create additional hunting opportunities that will help with recruitment and retention of the hunters who fund the majority of wildlife management, and it will provide for a long-needed adjustment to hunting license and stamp fees that have not changed for 30 or more years.

Background Information

Environmental awareness, including the need to conserve our wildlife resources, is at an all-time high and WHS is a leader in promoting this message. The unit currently employs several staff whose primary responsibilities include outreach and education. However, as the state's human population steadily increases, threats to wildlife and other natural resources also increase, causing the need for additional public education. At the same time, there is great value to public health by offering outdoor recreation opportunities, including hunting. Creating a specialized outreach and recreation program with dedicated staff will assist WHS in addressing both of these subjects.

Revenue is required to offer outreach programs like ones mentioned above and to manage Maryland's vast wildlife resources. The funds for these activities primarily come from hunting license sales and matching federal grant monies. Thus, recruiting and maintaining hunters is essential to maintaining these funds and for WHS to fulfill its mission. Offering additional hunting opportunities through more lands to hunt, more license options, and more days to hunt (especially weekends) aids significantly with recruiting and retaining hunters. With a resident license available to college students, many of these students will return to Maryland and hunt after graduating. Sunday hunting affords many hunters who work and cannot hunt through the week twice as much time to be in the field, increasing the likelihood that they will remain hunters.

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Maryland hunting license and stamp fees have not been significantly adjusted for over 30 years. Adjusting these fees will enable WHS to improve essential services to the public and better fulfill its mission to promote and conserve the state's vast ecological resources. Along with the fee adjustment revenue itself, WHS is eligible to receive federal grant monies awarded at a 1:3 ratio through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act. This means for every \$1 WHS receives directly in fee adjustments, \$3 in federal grant money is available for conservation-related work. By adjusting hunting license and stamp fees, WHS can receive more federal grant money to further the conservation and outdoor recreation mission. Unfortunately, as it stands now, federal grant money opportunities continue to increase while WHS matching special funds remain stagnant.

It is important to note that hunting license and stamp revenues are not used just for hunting-related activities. WHS is responsible for the management and conservation of all of the State's wildlife resources. Along with approximately one dozen primary game species, WHS manages hundreds of rare, threatened and endangered plants and animals. Hunting license and stamp fees are the primary source of State funding for ensuring the long-term conservation of these species and the native ecosystems and natural communities that are critical to their survival. Adequate funding is needed for WHS to manage and protect these resources in the face of a rapidly growing human population and a changing climate.

WHS also manages 64 public Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's) totaling over 125,000 acres throughout the State. These areas are open to the public, free of charge, for wildlife recreation opportunities including hunting, hiking, and wildlife watching. Rapidly increasing operational costs have made it challenging to conduct essential maintenance and habitat management on these WHS lands, which can affect the safety and enjoyment that WMA visitors expect. Additional funding is needed to improve these lands and offer quality experiences for their users.

Bill Explanation

HB 983 creates a conservation education and outdoor recreation program with dedicated staff focused on communities who normally have not accessed such activities. The legislation addresses WHS funding issues by adjusting hunting license and stamp fees, and by improving hunter recruitment and retention programs. HB 983 assists with hunter recruitment efforts in multiple ways, including by offering a resident-priced license to non-resident college students so that they can more easily enjoy Maryland's vast hunting opportunities. HB 983 also assists with hunter recruitment and retention by enabling additional Sunday hunting opportunities for migratory birds. Lastly, recruitment and retention is enhanced by the creation of additional public hunting lands through the use of expanded funding opportunities. HB 983 also creates an avenue for WHS to work cooperatively with the Department of Agriculture to address deer population concerns as they relate to agricultural crop damage.