



MARYLAND
HORSE
COUNCIL

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One Common Bond: The Horse
One Common Voice: The Horse Council

In the House Environment & Transportation Committee, March 3, 2023

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on HB 983

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

Favorable with Amendment

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based trade association that represents the state-wide horse industry in Maryland. Our members include horse farms; horse related businesses; equestrian competitors; trainers; individual enthusiasts; equine-assisted therapy programs; and breed, interest, and discipline associations. We stand for over 30,000 Marylanders who make their living with horses, or who just own and love them.

POSITION

The Horse Council supports HB 983, if amended to remove the provision opening Sundays to migratory game bird hunting, and to make clear that any plan for deer population control developed pursuant to SECTION 2 of the bill will not permit Sunday hunting on state park system lands.

The Maryland Horse Council supports and applauds many of the provisions in HB 983, including the increase in fees and especially the creation of the Wildlife Conservation Education and Outreach Program. Since the onset of the Pandemic, interest and participation in outdoor activities have skyrocketed, and increased opportunities for education about and access to outdoor experiences of all types, including hiking, birdwatching, trail riding and hunting, is an important goal.

We oppose one provision, however - the change to Section 10-410 of the Natural Resources Article **that will allow Sunday Hunting of migratory game** birds (see page 11, line 25). In recent years, there have been several bills that attempted to allow Sunday hunting of migratory game birds. All were “stand alone” bills; and all have failed.

We also have concerns about SECTION 2 of the bill, which directs the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop, in consultation with the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA), a plan to address the “overpopulation of deer in the state.” “The plan shall include: (1) the feasibility of implementing **a rotational closure hunting strategy on State land, including State park system lands and hunting on State land on Sundays.**”

None of our sources inside or outside DNR have been able to explain what “a rotational closure hunting strategy” is, and we are concerned that it implies a plan for Sunday closure of some or all state park system lands, to allow hunting - which is currently forbidden. Closing State parks to the general public on Sundays is just a really bad idea.

The horse industry in Maryland is a large, engaged and thriving constituency, and a strong economic engine: 28,000 direct equine related jobs; 16,000 properties occupying over 705,000 acres (almost 10% of Maryland’s total land area, and over 25% of Maryland’s agricultural land) The industry represents \$2.1 billion in annual economic impact, generating \$78 million in annual tax revenue. Trail riders are the largest interest group among Maryland riders, according to a recent survey by the Equiery magazine.¹ There are more horses per square mile in Maryland than in any state in the Union. (See attached fact sheet.) There are hundreds to thousands of horses in every county in the state.² Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect. While the Fiscal Note for this bill does not separately break out economic impact data for the migratory game bird section, Fiscal Notes on prior bills proposing Sunday hunting of migratory game birds concluded that the economic impact would be “minimal” or not material.

Passage of this bill at this time does not seem to make sense, given that the federal government reduced bag limits and season length for Canada geese and mallards in recent years due to significant declines in bird populations. According to the recently released DNR Midwinter Waterfowl Survey Results for 2023, total populations of waterfowl along the Chesapeake Bay, Potomac River and Atlantic Coastline have declined precipitously since 2018, and the Canada Goose population has declined by half.³ Moreover some waterfowl hunters and outfitters believe that seven day a week hunting is deleterious because too much hunting pressure on waterfowl drives the birds away, an effect that can last for years.⁴

It is important to make clear that the Horse Council is not opposed to hunting. Many of our members are hunters of deer, other game mammals, and game birds.

¹ <http://equiery.com/trail-riding-tops-reader-survey/>

² According to the 2010 Maryland Equine Census (current numbers are likely about 25% higher, based on current total statewide population): Allegany 350; Baltimore 8950; Carroll 6050; Frederick 7850; Garrett 1500; Harford 6200; Howard 4350; Montgomery 7900; Washington 3750; Anne Arundel 4500; Calvert 1350; Charles 1750; Prince George’s 7100; Saint Mary’s 2300; Caroline 1300; Cecil 6200; Kent 1200; Queen Anne’s 1700; Talbot 1500; Dorchester 350; Somerset 270; Wicomico 1800; Worcester 880

³ Total waterfowl in 2018: 1,023,300, in 2023: 632,000. Canada Geese in 2018: 641,000, in 2023: 320,800.

⁴ <https://www.ducks.org/hunting/waterfowl-hunting-tips/waterfowlers-notebook-managing-hunting-pressure>

For more than 20 years, **the Maryland Horse Council has worked to ensure fair use of shared natural resources during hunting seasons**, by seeking to preserve Sundays as the one day of the week when children and adults who are hikers, birdwatchers, dog walkers, trail riders and other outdoor enthusiasts could enjoy the outdoors without concern for adverse interactions with hunters. Now we are facing a statewide bill that would allow all day Sunday hunting for waterfowl - currently not allowed at all anywhere in the state, on virtually every Sunday from September through early March and in some cases, mid-April.

The issue of recreational Sunday hunting is certainly a fraught one. In a November 2018 independent **Gonzales statewide poll**, the vast majority of respondents opposed Sunday hunting:

SUNDAY HUNTING Oppose 68.9%; Favor 21.9%

Breakdown:

Strongly Favor 13.5%

Somewhat Favor 8.4%

Somewhat Oppose 15.4%

Strongly Oppose 53.5%

These majorities opposed to Sunday hunting hold true in Baltimore Metro, Washington Metro AND Rural areas. Rural Maryland opposed Sunday hunting 60.5% vs 34.1% in favor.

It is also **sometimes argued that recreational hunters need Sundays** because they and their children have other things to do on Saturdays - a situation that plainly applies to most of Maryland's users of outdoor resources, be they hunters, birdwatchers, dog walkers, mountain bikers, off-road vehicle enthusiasts and trail riders. So why should one group get special consideration - especially since, as the fiscal note shows, there is no significant economic benefit? Where is the balancing of the public good?

The number of licensed hunters in Maryland, fewer than 100,000, is just about 2% of the state's overall population of about 6 million. In 2014, the Horse Council conducted a statewide survey on Sunday hunting. **68% of respondents ride on trails on public or private land one or more days a week. And, perhaps most significantly, 85% said they changed their schedules or riding locations to avoid encountering hunters. In the Gonzales poll, 78% of respondents said they would change their plans to avoid encountering hunters.**

The Sunday hunting provision of this bill would further infringe on the rights of other users of our shared natural resources in Maryland, especially since **many riders ride around the edges of harvested crop land, which attracts migratory birds.**

The Maryland Horse Council has proposed reasonable compromises that would still allow fair use of shared natural resources, by cutting off Sunday hunting, where allowed, at **10:30 am**. This would allow hunters to hunt at favorable hours, yet still give trail riders and others plenty of Sunday access to the outdoors. This compromise has been embraced by some legislators, who have praised the Horse Council for this reasonable approach, and it has now been adopted by several counties.

We of course recognize that private land owners have some right to decide what uses they want to allow on their land. But such rights have never been absolute, as any review of zoning and land use rules can plainly establish. And, as a practical matter the public/private land distinction affords little relief since public and private tracts are often relatively small, non-contiguous, intertwined and rarely well-marked. In our survey, referenced above, 56% of respondents said they ride on trails that cross both public and private land.

We have one additional concern: Section 2 of the bill (page 11, lines 26-30 and page 12, lines 1-13), requires DNR, in consultation with MDA, to develop a plan to address deer overpopulation in the State. The plan “shall include” **“the feasibility of implementing a rotational closure hunting strategy on State land, including State park system lands and hunting on State land on Sundays.”** None of our sources inside or outside DNR have been able to explain what “a rotational closure hunting strategy” is, and we are concerned that it implies a plan for closure of some or all state park system lands to allow for Sunday hunting - which is currently forbidden.

Since the advent of the pandemic, widespread use of outdoor recreation and natural resources by the general public has only increased. For example, **attendance at Maryland State Parks in 2020 increased 45% over 2019, which was also a record year. Demand has remained strong. Many of these new users are unfamiliar with the rules of hunting and hunting seasons, including the distinctions between private and public lands.** In 2021, Lt. Governor Rutherford stated: “With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic changing the way we live, work, and play, more and more Marylanders are finding affordable, socially-distant, and family-friendly recreation opportunities at our parks and public lands.” Now is not the time to increase general public exposure to possible hunting risks, or to further deter the public from outdoor recreation.

Moreover, the deer population is in decline - down to about 200,000 from a high of 300,00. In a February 2022 press release, DNR Wildlife and Heritage Service Director Paul Peditto stated “the deer population is trending toward a population level that reduces damage to agriculture and minimizes impacts on our natural communities.”

CONCLUSION

We urge the Committee to remove the provision opening Sundays to migratory game bird hunting, make clear that Sunday hunting in State Park System lands remains forbidden, and then favorably report HB 983.

Respectfully submitted,

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The Maryland Horse Industry

Why Does It Matter?

51% of Maryland households contain at least one horse enthusiast
Maryland has 10.5 horses per square mile, more than any other state



1. Economic Impact

\$2.1 billion annual economic impact

\$80 million spent on hay, feed, and straw

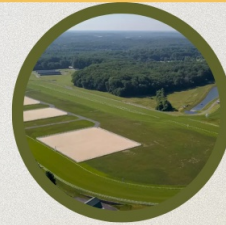
\$78 million in tax revenue

2. Open Space

Over 25% of agricultural land in horse use

88,000 acres in permanent preservation

Land conserved with private dollars



3. Tourism

Four international competition venues

\$___ generated in Prince George's County

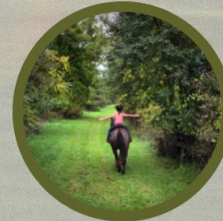
Three internationally televised events

4. Health and Wellness

40 therapeutic riding programs

10,000 children served by educational programs

\$8.4 million economic impact



5. Jobs

>28,000 industry jobs

200 equine organizations

16,000 horse farms and stables

Data source: Maryland Horse Industry Board
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