



MARYLAND
HORSE
COUNCIL

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

In the Senate Education, Energy & the Environment Committee, February 27, 2024

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on SB 847

Dorchester County - Sunday Hunting - Repeal of Time Restrictions - UNFAVORABLE

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 represent over 30,000 Marylanders who make their living with horses, or who just own and love them.

❖ **A majority of Marylanders oppose Sunday hunting.** An independent statewide poll conducted by **Gonzales Research and Media Services** in 2018 found that **68.9% of respondents oppose Sunday hunting.** Even DNR's own 2018 commissioned survey found that a majority of the general population does not favor Sunday hunting and does not want to see it expanded.¹

❖ **This bill would allow all day Sunday hunting in Dorchester County for many months of the year.**

❖ **This bill upends a compromise solution that many hoped would bring this issue, which has consumed much of this Committee's time for many years, to a final closure that gave everyone a little bit of what they wanted.** It seeks to strip recreational users of their only right to quiet and safe enjoyment of the outdoors on one - partial - day of the week.

❖ This bill would infringe on the rights of the general public to enjoy outdoor recreation, the importance of which has received increased attention since the Pandemic. **78% of the Gonzales poll respondents said they would decide to alter their recreational plans to avoid hunters. In a Maryland Horse Council 2016 poll, 85% of respondents said they changed their schedules or riding locations to avoid encountering hunters.** The majority of Maryland's equestrians do at least some trail riding.

¹ https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Documents/2018_DeerPublicOpinionSurvey.pdf

❖ **Since the advent of the pandemic, widespread use of outdoor recreation and natural resources by the general public has increased.** For example, attendance at Maryland State Parks in 2020 increased 45% over 2019, which was also a record year.² Demand has remained strong. **Many of these new users are unfamiliar with the rules of hunting and hunting seasons, including the distinctions between public and private lands. Now is not the time to increase general public exposure to possible hunting risks or to further deter the public from outdoor recreation. We have separately submitted with this testimony a report of hunting incidents involving third parties, from 2007 to the latest available data, compiled from DNR's own data.**

❖ **The Maryland horse industry represents \$2.9 billion in economic impact and supports 28,000 jobs. There are over 94,000 horses in Maryland (more per square mile than any state in the Union). There are over 700,000 horse enthusiasts.³ There are horses in every county in the state and in Baltimore City. The majority of Maryland riders do trail riding.⁴**

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based, umbrella trade association of the entire horse industry in Maryland. Our membership includes breed, interest and discipline associations, plus horse farms and stables, horse-related businesses, and horse owners representing all facets of the Maryland equestrian community, from the owners of race horses and race tracks, to the owners of international level competition horses, local sport horses, trail horses or just beloved retired companion horses. The owner of Pimlico, Laurel and Rosecroft racetracks is a member, as are vets, tack stores, and other farms, businesses and enthusiasts throughout the state. Every Maryland county, without exception, is home to hundreds to thousands of horses. There are more horses per square mile in Maryland than in any state in the Union.

The horse industry in Maryland is a large, engaged and thriving constituency, and a strong economic engine: 28,000 direct equine related jobs, supporting over \$1 billion in wages. The industry represents \$2.9 billion in annual economic impact. Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect.

POSITION

The Horse Council opposes SB 847

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BACKGROUND

For over 20 years, the Maryland Horse Council has worked to ensure fair use of shared natural resources during hunting season, by seeking to preserve Sundays as the one day of the week

² <https://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2021/02/04/lt-governor-boyd-k-rutherford-maryland-department-of-natural-resources-announce-45-percent-increase-in-maryland-state-parks-attendance-in-2020/>

³2023 Economic Impact Study of the Maryland Horse Industry, The American Horse Council Foundation.

⁴<http://equiery.com/trail-riding-tops-reader-survey/>

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. Almost 20 years ago, we helped defeat a number of statewide Sunday hunting bills.

Proponents of Sunday hunting then changed tactics, seeking to introduce Sunday hunting on a county-by-county basis, which we also opposed vigorously. Sometimes they were successful; sometimes not. When they were successful, they succeeded in making an already complicated situation more complicated, making it more difficult for others to plan their outings, and for Natural Resources Police to effectively crack down on poachers and irresponsible hunters, which has caused even more negative encounters between irresponsible hunters and other users.⁵

Beginning in 2016, MHC 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 compromise still gives hunters, trail riders and others plenty of Sunday access to opportunities. This compromise was embraced by some legislators, who have praised the Horse Council for this reasonable approach. In recent years, this compromise has been amended into the statute for Calvert, Charles, Caroline, Kent, Montgomery, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Talbot County and Wicomico Counties. With these amendments, the Committee sent a strong signal that this issue should be put to bed, with a compromise that gave everyone a little bit of what they wanted.

This bill attempts to roll back that compromise in Dorchester County, and to strip recreational users of their only right to quiet and safe enjoyment of the outdoors on one - partial - day of the week. The bill would allow all day Sunday hunting for all species in Dorchester County. This effectively is nearly year-round. This bill does nothing to improve the situation for Natural Resources Police and continues to infringe on the rights of other users of our shared natural resources in Maryland.

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 are true in Baltimore Metro, Washington Metro AND Rural areas. Rural Maryland opposed Sunday hunting 60.5% vs 34.1% in favor. Even DNR's own commissioned survey found that a majority of the general population does not favor

⁵ In a 2016 Maryland Horse Council survey, 35% of respondents reported "adverse incidents" with hunters while trail riding, ranging from rudeness to deliberate attempts to spook horses, threatening with firearms, and firing of "warning" shots. Significant percentages of DNR's survey respondents also reported problems when encountering hunters.

Sunday hunting and does not want to see it expanded. (See footnote 1.) This bill directly contravenes that clear public opinion.

It is important to make clear that MHC is not opposed to hunting. Many of our members are hunters of deer, other game mammals and game birds. We just want to ensure that everyone has a safe option for enjoyment of the outdoors. The COVID pandemic has dramatically increased the level of outdoor activity and use of natural resources. According to DNR, 2020 State Park attendance increased by 45% to 21.5 million visitors. Demand has remained strong. 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," (See footnote 2.) Many of these new users are unfamiliar with the rules of hunting and hunting seasons, and are unaware that they may encounter hunters in the woods. Now is not the time to roll the dice and increase the chances of potential adverse interactions between hunters and members of the public who are relatively new to the outdoors..

It is also sometimes argued that recreational hunters need Sundays because they have other things to do on Saturdays - a situation that plainly applies to most of Maryland's families who use 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? Where is the balancing of the public good, the equitable access? The number of licensed resident hunters in Maryland, about 100,000, is less than 2% of the state's population of about 6 million. Compare that with the 24% who reported (pre-pandemic) making frequent or occasional trips specifically to view and experience wildlife in their native habitat for photography or other non- hunting purposes. (See footnote 1.)

In MHC's 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.

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.

CONCLUSION

We urge the Committee to give SB 847 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,
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