



MARYLAND  
**HORSE**  
COUNCIL

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

In the House Environment & Transportation Committee, February 21, 2024

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on HB 778

Natural Resources - Sunday Hunting - Migratory Game Birds

UNFAVORABLE

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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.

#### POSITION

We oppose the change to Section 10-410 of the Natural Resources Article that will allow Sunday Hunting of migratory game birds. In recent years, there have been several bills that attempted to allow Sunday hunting of migratory game birds. All have failed.

The horse industry in Maryland is a large, engaged and thriving constituency, and a strong economic engine. It supports 28,000 direct equine related jobs with \$1.1 billion in industry wages. The industry represents \$2.9 billion in annual economic impact, generating \$78 million in annual tax revenue. A graphic illustrating these points, and largely based on the 2024 American Horse Council Economic Impact Study, has been filed with this written testimony.

Trail riders are the largest interest group among Maryland riders, according to a survey by the Equiery magazine. There are more horses per square mile in Maryland than in any state in the Union. There are hundreds to thousands of horses in every county in the state. Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect.

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.

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. This is a statewide bill that would allow all day Sunday hunting for migratory game birds - currently not allowed at all anywhere in the state, on virtually every Sunday from September through 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 Fiscal Notes for previous bills have shown, there is no significant economic benefit? Where is the balancing of the public good?

The number of licensed resident hunters in Maryland, fewer 100,000, is just about 2% of the state's overall population of about 6 million. By contrast, there are over 700,000 horse enthusiasts in Maryland.

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. This bill would further infringe on the rights of trail riders, 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 been adopted into recent Maryland hunting legislation.

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.

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. 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.

#### CONCLUSION

We urge the Committee to give HB 778 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

**THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL**

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