



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 4, 2025

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on SB 272

Prince George's County - Natural Resources -
Sunday Deer Hunting and Archery Hunting Safety Zones - 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 700,000 Marylanders who make their living with horses, or who just own or 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. A copy of that poll has been filed with this testimony. Even the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) 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 Sunday hunting in Prince George's for the first time ever, on almost every Sunday from September through January.**
- **This bill would infringe on the rights of the general public to enjoy outdoor recreation, the importance of which has been acknowledged by the establishment of the Office of Outdoor Recreation within DNR, and the passage of the Great Maryland Outdoors Act in 2022. 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.**
- **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

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

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 private 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. We have separately submitted with this testimony a report of hunting incidents from 2007 - 2023, compiled from DNR's own data.**

- **DNR has concluded that the deer population in Maryland has stabilized, and additional deer reduction measures are not needed and even contraindicated.** The deer population in Maryland has declined from a high of almost 300,000 in 2002 to about 230,000 in 2024.³ DNR has from time to time reduced bag limits (i.e., the number of deer allowed to be taken), implicitly acknowledging that reducing the deer population is not a priority. **In a February 2022 press release, then 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.”** Nevertheless, according to DNR's survey, hunters want to see the deer population maintained or increased.
- **We agree that deer can present health, public safety and economic problems in Maryland. However, Sunday hunting is demonstrably not an effective solution to that problem. Almost all Maryland counties have vastly expanded Sunday hunting in recent years, yet the deer harvest has fallen. from over 100,000 in 2008/9 and 2009/10 to under 73,000 in 2023/4.**
- Therefore, **Sunday hunting is not an effective deer management tool; it is rather a hunter convenience tool.** Convenience is surely a benefit, but it is a benefit that should be available to all constituents equitably, not just one small segment. **The number of licensed hunters in Maryland, usually a little over 100,000 (of which only a portion are Maryland residents), is less than 2% of the state's population of about 6 million.**
- **The Maryland horse industry represents \$2.9 billion in economic impact; 28,000 jobs; \$1.1 billion in total wages; \$1.7 billion in total contribution to GDP.** There are almost 100,000 horses in Maryland (more per square mile than any state in the Union), and over 700,000 horse enthusiasts. (See MD Econ Impact Report attached.) There are horses in every county in the state. The majority of Maryland riders do at least some 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

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/>

³ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/deer-population-by-state>

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

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. As such, we stand for over 700,000 Marylanders. Every Maryland county, without exception, is home to hundreds to thousands of horses. There are more horse 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; 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 \$2.9 billion in annual economic impact. Horse industry participants spend \$1 billion dollars annually (compare that to the \$264 million annual figure for hunters cited in the Fiscal and Policy Note, as of 2011 - the last available data). Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect.

POSITION

The Horse Council opposes SB 272.

BACKGROUND

For over 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, cross-country skiers, 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

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 compromise still gives hunters, trail riders and others plenty of Sunday access to opportunities. This compromise has been embraced by some legislators, who have praised the Horse Council for this reasonable approach, and it **has been adopted in some form by Calvert, Caroline, Charles, Dorchester, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Montgomery, Kent, Talbot, Worcester, and Wicomico Counties**. Now we are facing a bill that would allow all day Sunday hunting in Prince George's County for the first time ever. This bill does nothing to improve the situation for

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.

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 the 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 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 the Horse Council 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. Many of these new users are unfamiliar with the rules of hunting and hunting seasons, are unaware that they may encounter hunters in the woods, and may not be aware of the boundaries between public and private lands, which are often not well marked.** 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. We have separately submitted with this testimony a nine page report, culled from DNR's own data, of hunting accidents (excluding falls from tree stands and hunter self-inflicted wounds).

Through our years of studying DNR data, we are unconvinced that recreational hunting is the best solution for managing the deer herd. **These data reveal that despite expansion of Sunday hunting in most jurisdictions, deer harvest numbers are dropping. According to the Maryland Annual Deer Reports, the deer harvest has fallen from over 100,000 in 2008/9 and 2009/10 to under 73,000 in 2023/4.**

It is sometimes argued that the declining numbers of recreational hunters is in part responsible for the declining harvest, but that begs the question of whether relying on recreational hunters is therefore "backing the wrong horse" in the effort to reduce the deer population. Adding Sundays demonstrably does not increase the harvest; it just affords recreational hunters the luxury of choosing which weekend day to devote to hunting, thereby spreading the same number of deer kills over seven days instead of six. **In the DNR survey, almost 60% of the hunters did not indicate that they would harvest more deer if Sundays were available.** So adding Sundays is arguably more a matter of hunter convenience than sound deer management. Convenience is surely a benefit, but it is a benefit that should be available to all

constituents equitably, not just one small segment. The number of licensed hunters in Maryland (resident and non-resident) is less than 2% of the state's population. Compare that with the 24% who reported making frequent or occasional trips specifically to view and experience deer in their native habitat for photography or other non-hunting purposes. (See footnote 1.)

Contravening many arguments that Sunday hunting is needed to help control a burgeoning deer population is the fact that the size of the Maryland deer herd has been steadily declining from a peak of about 300,000 in 2002 to a about 230,000 in 2021. Indeed, DNR has from time to time reduced the bag limits (i.e., the number of deer allowed to be taken), implicitly acknowledging that reducing the deer population is not a priority. According to DNR's survey, hunters want to see the deer population maintained or increased.

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? In the Horse Council'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.

Another important factor to consider in the balancing of the public good is the fact that, unlike many other states, Maryland's hunting seasons are very long. Part of the basis for these long seasons is that Maryland lacked Sunday hunting for most of its history. When Sunday hunting was introduced, there was not a corresponding shortening of the hunting seasons, so now there are both long seasons and increasing Sunday hunting opportunities.

This bill would authorize Sunday hunting on private land. 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 272 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

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