



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 28, 2025

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on HB 654

Wicomico County - Sunday Hunting Time Restrictions - Repeal - 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,, and over 53% strongly oppose..** 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 all day Sunday hunting on every Sunday of the year in Wicomico County on private and public land.**
- **This bill would abrogate a hard won compromise between hunters and other users of the outdoors that has been accepted by numerous counties, to put to bed the decades-long debate about Sunday hunting, and would allow all day Sunday hunting on both public and private land in Wicomico County virtually year-round. 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 been acknowledged by the establishment of the Office of**

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

Outdoor Recreation within DNR, and the passage of the Great Maryland Outdoors Act in 2022. 78% of the Gonzales poll respondents said they would 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 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.**
- **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.³

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. Our membership also includes 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 often cited in Fiscal & Policy Notes). Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect.

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

POSITION

The Horse Council opposes HB 654.

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.⁴

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 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 Wicomico County, on public as well as private land, for all species and all seasons - essentially year round. According to the Maryland hunting season calendar, <https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Documents/Maryland-Hunting-Seasons-Calendar-2024-2025.pdf>, there is an open season for at least one species from mid-August through late May. Coyote and groundhog are literally 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 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%

⁴ 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.

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).

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. 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 wildlife in their native habitat for photography or other non-hunting purposes. (See footnote 1.)

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.

CONCLUSION

We urge the Committee to give HB 654 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL

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