



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, March 10, 2026

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on SB 643

Natural Resources - Hunting - Management - 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 and love them.

First of all, it is important to note that SB 643 is really two bills in one. This two-in-one bill is a proposal to take control of the Sunday hunting issue away from the peoples' representatives and hand it to an agency that largely serves a single special interest group on this issue. Finally, this is a complicated bill that, while it may ultimately result in a shorter statute, may not result in a less complicated or more transparent regulatory scheme.

The "two bills" are:

Section 1, which takes effect 7/1/2026

- In Natural Resources Article Section 10-206:

Allows the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to permit year-round, 7-day-a-week, shooting of deer on properties of at least 10 acres with deer damage to landscaping, crops, forest, etc., by creating "deer damage permits;" (in addition to the current, agricultural, Deer Management Permits). No shooting would be

allowed within 25 yards of DNR designated equestrian trails. DNR would issue public maps of these areas. There are at least two very significant problems with this proposal. First, 25 yards - 75 feet - is an incredibly short distance, given the range of modern hunting weapons. In Natural Resources Article Section 10-410 (g), the Legislature has determined various "safety zone" distances for discharge of weapons in certain circumstances - as much as 300 yards, but never less than 50 yards. Also there are many, many trails used by hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, dog walkers, etc., - on public and private land - that are not "a Department trail designated for equestrian use," where hunters could shoot right up to the property line.

- In Natural Resources Article Section 10-410 (Sunday hunting), the Bill doesn't much change the current law, except -

- Wicomico, Kent & Montgomery Counties - adds hunting from 3:00 pm to sunset (in addition to mornings until 10:30) on all but one Sunday in the deer firearms season (that one Sunday already is all day).
- Allows year-round Sunday hunting on "Deer Damage Permits" in addition to Deer Management (agricultural) Permits.
- Generally allows Sunday hunting for migratory game birds.
- Adds Sunday hunting for migratory Canada Geese, Atlantic Population) for certain classes of hunters.

In the course of its efforts over the years to address the Sunday hunting issue, MHC negotiated a compromise that would allow fair shared use of natural resources, by cutting off Sunday hunting, where allowed, at 10:30 am, and this compromise has been embraced by the Legislature. This bill, at least until the pilot program goes into effect, chips away at the concept of "fair & shared" by taking more Sunday time away from non-hunters, adding a second hunting period from 3:00 pm until sunset on Sundays.

Section 2 is the most significant and far-reaching portion of the bill. It creates a three year Pilot program (7/1/2027 - 6/30/2030), after which it "shall be abrogated and of no further force and effect." It calls for a report to the Legislature on or before December 1, 2029, "on the effectiveness of this Act on deer management and balancing stakeholder interests."

The pilot program eliminates almost all of the existing statute, and substitutes:
(I) SUBJECT TO THE PROVISIONS OF THIS SECTION, THE DEPARTMENT SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS ALLOWING PERSONS TO HUNT ON SUNDAYS DURING THE GAME BIRD AND GAME MAMMAL SEASONS.

This is the provision that transfers control to DNR.

(II) THE REGULATIONS ADOPTED UNDER THIS SUBSECTION SHALL AT A MINIMUM ALLOW SUNDAY HUNTING ON THE HOURS AND DAYS AUTHORIZED FOR SUNDAY HUNTING BY SPECIES, HUNTING SEASON, AND COUNTY ON JUNE 30, 2027.

In other words, there can't be any less Sunday hunting than what was in effect on 6/30/2027, so the program is conceived and designed to only expand Sunday hunting.

This Section also creates blanket allowance of Sunday hunting on public land (except state parks).

Thus, Section 2 is the real meat of the bill, and it is fundamentally about who makes public policy decisions - the Legislators who represent all of their constituents, or DNR, which demonstrably represents the interests of just one constituency (hunters) on this issue, even though a majority of Maryland residents oppose Sunday hunting. An independent statewide survey conducted by Gonzales Research and Media Services in 2018 found that 68.9% of respondents oppose Sunday hunting, and of that, 53% strongly oppose it. A copy of that survey has been filed with this testimony. Even DNR's own 2018 survey found that a majority of the general population is not in favor of Sunday hunting.¹

Key points -

Legislative Workload

It has been argued that this legislation will help alleviate the clearly intense workload of the Legislators during Session. We fully appreciate the enormous workload of the Legislators, but would point out that, of the approximately 2500 bills introduced in each session, very few relate to Sunday hunting - for example: two in 2024, four in 2025, three in 2026 (not counting cross files of some those bills, and not counting this bill).

Furthermore, this bill will not insulate the Legislature from having to hear future Sunday hunting bills. Citizens can always bring bills to change the system, or to challenge particular DNR policies. In fact, if this bill results in unpopular DNR actions, the Legislature might see an even greater influx of bills.

DNR is the Expert

It may be argued that "DNR already regulates the other six days days, the seventh should be no different." We acknowledge and truly respect that DNR is staffed with dedicated wildlife managers. But the Sunday hunting debate is not about wildlife management, it is about public policy regarding the effect on other users.

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

Transparency, Accessibility, and Equity

Removing direct authority over Sunday hunting from the Legislature results in a process that is much less transparent and accessible than the current system. For example, the DNR bi-annual meetings where ideas for new regulations are discussed are by invitation only, as were the DNR meetings this summer where the idea of removing control from the Legislature was proposed. DNR consistently excludes the majority of non-hunting interests from its by-invitation hunting regulation process. This summer's "stakeholder meetings" being the most stark example. The first meeting was almost completely devoid of non-hunting interests; requests from others to join the meeting were denied. Those meetings were initiated at the request of Del. Boyce in a memo to Secretary Kurtz wherein Del. Boyce listed nine issues that she wanted discussed and resolved, including "policy inconsistencies," "pattern and practice discrepancies," "concerns of the equine community," and "information about hunting incidents or casualties in the past 30 years, or more, if applicable." None of that was discussed. Instead, at that first meeting, Assistant Secretary Peditto rolled out his plan to remove jurisdiction over Sunday hunting from the Legislature and lodge it within DNR.

Most Marylanders do not have the bandwidth to regularly check the Maryland Register for new proposed rules, and the notice and comment process afforded there does not provide for oral testimony and question-and-answer interchange between the regulators and the regulated. Although the Joint Committee on Administrative, Executive, and Legislative Review (AELR) reviews proposed regulations, that review is generally limited in scope to determining whether the regulations conform to the statutory authority of the agency and the legislative intent of the statute under which the regulations are proposed. Moreover, there is no possibility for a public hearing except in some cases by request of an AELR member. Moreover, the public is generally unaware of this process.

Safety

It is important not to lose track of the fact that it is just not safe for members of the general public to be out in the woods with armed hunters. Legislation pending in this Session, **SB 545/HB 716**, which would require written permission for surveyors to enter private land during deer firearms season, is an acknowledgement of that very fact. During the House hearing, **the Sponsor stated that "every year there are accidental deaths from hunting," and "you can't have people walking around in the woods" . . . "the safety factor is a big thing."**

The Hunting Accident Report submitted with our written testimony clearly demonstrates that.

Through the years MHC has testified numerous times about how Sunday hunting is not only opposed by most Marylanders, but that it is patently unsafe for hunters and non-hunters to contemporaneously share outdoor spaces. It is inarguable that armed hunters present a safety risk not presented by other user groups. It just makes sense that those other user groups should have at least one day when they do not have to take that risk. That decision should be with the Legislators who represent all of their constituents.

Sunday Hunting is not an effective Deer Management Tool

Proponents of Sunday hunting bills urge passage because they claim that Sunday hunting is among the best tools to reduce the deer population. That claim is belied by the facts. In 2003, Gov. Ehrlich signed the bill allowing the first Sunday hunting in Maryland - on two Sundays in the entire deer season. **For the 2004 - 2005 season, the deer harvest was 93,868.** In ensuing years, more and more Sundays were added to the calendar. **By this past season,** 16 of Maryland's 23 counties had Sunday hunting on 21 out of the 22 total allowable days, and two counties had 15 Sundays. Yet **the total deer harvest was 71,649, a decline of almost 25%.**

it may be suggested that Maryland should adopt this bill because other states allow Sunday hunting to be exclusively regulated by their game control agencies, most recently Pennsylvania. It goes without saying that each state has unique circumstances. Patently, Maryland is not like Pennsylvania in many respects. For example, **Pennsylvania's population density is 286 people per square mile; Maryland's is 632 people per square mile.** Thus, determination of where and when discharge of weapons should be allowed has wholly different considerations.

We urge the Committee to give SB 643 an Unfavorable Report.

Respectfully submitted,

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