



MARYLAND
HORSE
COUNCIL

P.O. Box 606 | Lisbon, Maryland 21797
www.mdhorsecouncil.org

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

In the House Environment & Transportation Committee, March 4, 2026

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on HB 780

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 it.** 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 some 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. 78% of the Gonzales survey respondents said they would decide to alter their recreational plans to avoid hunters. In a Maryland Horse Council 2016 survey, 85% of respondents said they changed their schedules or riding locations to avoid encountering hunters.**

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

- **Since the pandemic, widespread use of outdoor recreation and natural resources by the general public has increased and remains 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 accidents from FY2007 - FY2025, compiled from DNR's own data, which shows that contemporaneously sharing the outdoors with hunters has real risk of injury and even death**

The horse industry in Maryland is a large, engaged, and thriving constituency, and a strong economic engine: \$2.9 billion in economic impact; 28,000 jobs; \$1.1 billion in total wages; \$1.7 billion in total contribution to GDP. 16,000 properties occupying over 705,000 acres (almost 10% of Maryland's total land area, and over 25% of Maryland's agricultural land) Horse industry participants spend \$1 billion annually (compare that to the \$264 million annual figure for hunters often cited in Fiscal and Policy Notes). 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.² Thus, legislative actions that affect the equine industry have a broad economic effect.

POSITION

The Horse Council opposes HB 780.

BACKGROUND

For well 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 and other outdoor enthusiasts could enjoy the outdoors without concern for adverse interactions with hunters.³

Eventually, the Maryland Horse Council proposed a compromise that would allow fair use of shared natural resources, by cutting off Sunday hunting, where allowed, at 10:30 am. This compromise gave hunters, trail riders, and others, plenty of Sunday access to opportunities. This compromise was embraced by the Legislature for many counties. Now we are facing a bill that would roll back that compromise in Wicomico County, and allow all day Sunday hunting for every species of game bird and game mammal - essentially year round.

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%

² <http://equiery.com/trail-riding-tops-reader-survey/>

³ 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, firing of "warning" shots, and near misses with arrows. Significant percentages of DNR's survey respondents also reported problems when encountering hunters.

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 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. Expanding Sunday hunting will 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 report, culled from DNR's own data, of hunting accidents where people and property were injured (excluding falls from tree stands and hunter self-inflicted wounds).

It is often argued that expanded Sunday hunting is necessary for deer management. Simply put, Sunday hunting is not an efficient or effective deer management tool. 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. For example, in counties that vastly expanded Sunday hunting in 2013, the deer harvest has pretty consistently fallen year after year.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, about 100,000 (of which only about 85,000 are residents), is less than 2% of the state's population of about 6 million. 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. (DNR survey; see footnote 1.) As previously noted, there are 700,000 horse enthusiasts in Maryland.

It is sometimes argued that the declining harvest is in part due to the declining numbers of recreational hunters, but that begs the question of whether relying on recreational hunters is therefore "backing the wrong horse" in any 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.

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

⁴ Allegany - An increase of from 6 to 21 Sundays. In 2013-2014, the total harvest was 3636; in 2023-24 - 2952; 2024-25 - 3412
Frederick - Increase of from 6 to 15 Sundays. 2013-2014 - total harvest 8040; in 2023-24 - 6549; 2024-25 - 6869
Washington - Increase of from 6 to 21 Sundays. 2013-2014 - total harvest 6376 in 2023-24 - 4418; 2024-25 - 5066

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. 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 some time when they do not have to take that risk.

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 and some public 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. Moreover, hunting projectiles do not respect property lines and have often crossed onto land where hunting was not permitted (see Hunting Accident Report submitted with this testimony).

CONCLUSION

We urge the Committee to give HB 780 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL

(844) MDHORSE (844-634-6773)

info@mdhorsecouncil.org