

Representative Sheldon and fellow members of the Environment and Energy Committee,

My name is Alex Smith and I am writing to you as a hunter, fisherman, advocate for wildlife and wild spaces, and a father of two young children who I hope will have the opportunity to be strong stewards of natural landscapes and love them as I do.

I have spoken in support of certain principles that underly S.258, to the point at times of sticking my neck out a bit within my community, but there are some significant issues that I have with the bill as written that leave me unable to get behind it. However, I recognize that this bill is likely to pass and I feel that there are amendments to it that would make it more palatable to me and many of my peers in the hunting community- I will lay those out below.

First, a word on the good: this process, exhausting though it has been, has led me to conversations and relationships with individuals in the Animal Welfare community that I never imagined I'd be speaking to, or that I'd have anything in common with if I did. These conversations have been difficult, at times uncomfortable, and yet overwhelmingly positive and productive. We may have basic, fundamental differences in the ways that we view our place in nature, but we share deep love for many of the same things.

For this reason, I understand their frustration over their perceived stonewalling by the hunting community and I acknowledge that there's truth to it- we have gotten so fearful of incremental losses of hunting rights leading to wholesale erosion of them that we're unwilling to hear anything these people are saying, regardless of whether it has merit- I refer to arguments over killing sows with cubs, live action trail cameras, and wanton waste as examples of this. I'm not pointing fingers at the board or anyone else here- I've been as guilty as anyone of this. My ability to hunt and fish, to live what I feel to be the most natural and "human" of lives I can, means so much to me that I cannot stomach the idea of losing it, and my kids in turn losing it. Anything that feels like a step in the direction is extremely frightening, and makes me want to dig in my heels and fight back for all I've got. However, we've got to get over that if it leads to rejecting reasonable changes for fear of the slippery slope. That is not the way forward for us as conservationists, and it's not the way forward as members of society. I say this to make the point that I understand why people who do not feel that they've been heard are frustrated, and I hope that we will all learn from this process that we need to be more willing to engage with ideas on their own merit, rather than recoiling from them out of fear of what may come next.

However, while S.258 does good things- the proposed trainings for board members and the requirement of Senate confirmation of candidates for instance, my concern is that in an effort to honor a broader spectrum of "user groups" it fails to acknowledge the deep cultural, recreational, and public health values (both mental and physical) of a consumptive relationship with nature. An attempt to reduce wildlife management to something "science-based" has been called for by both sides on this issue, and that sentiment is reflected in this bill. I agree, as we all do, that sound, impartial science needs to be the first criteria in considering things like bag limits, means of take, season dates, etc, but the value of hunting to the community that engages in it is less easily quantified in that way.

For example, me shooting a wood duck off Bristol Pond is of no ecological benefit to anything or anyone but myself, my family, and whoever's around when I pull it out of the smoker. Ecologically speaking all there is as a result of my action is one less wood duck flying around

the pond- a net negative. However, it provided me and my family with nourishment, it led me outdoors into a beautiful place, and it taught me more about the ways of the species. That value cannot be ignored, and must be considered by any board that seeks to regulate these activities, alongside the more tangible ecological criteria.

- For this reason, I propose that Section 4041 Subsection D be amended to read: “The Board shall consider whether proposed rule is designed to maintain the best health, population, viewing, and utilization levels while weighing alongside these factors the cultural, traditional, and public health values of hunting/fishing/trapping the species in question.” For those of us who fear that S.258 constitutes an attack on hunting rights, simply and clearly stating that it is not would go a long way.
- I also propose that the bill establish a task force to explore additional pathways to funding the Fish and Wildlife department such as a “backpack tax”. We all acknowledge the precarious state of funding via the traditional streams of largely hunting and fishing related revenue, and this bill proposes scope and procedural changes that will cost the department additional resources.
- Finally, while I appreciated the amendment that requires senate confirmation of candidates, I feel that returning the vast majority of appointing power to the governor, while it may benefit the hunting community in the short term, is a regression and will lead to a more partisan makeup of the board than if the task of appointing board members were split between multiple entities, perhaps the Governor, Secretary of State, Natural Resources Committee, and Commissioner.

I believe that there is a way for the good in this bill to be accomplished while continuing to honor and promote the deep and rich hunting and fishing tradition of this state, and without undue financial burden on the Department- I ask you as my elected representatives to keep working on S.258 to accomplish those things.

Respectfully,  
Alex Smith