

Testimony on S.258

My name is Chris Ingram from Middlebury and I want to express my opposition to S.258. I've spent a lifetime of wildlife-based recreation and continue to engage in consumptive and non-consumptive activities. I enjoy hunting, trapping, and fishing and am a certified hunter and trapper education instructor, volunteer with the Dept in other ways, along with many other conservation organizations. I make my living working in the conservation, natural resources, and the hunting and fishing industry. These activities are part of my livelihood and my identity, and I fear that if passed, S.258 will quickly lead to additional limitations and restrictions to regulated hunting and trapping in Vermont.

The authors of S.258 say the bill has little to do with the outcome of hunting and trapping, however, after listening to several months of testimony from both sides, it is strikingly clear nearly everyone who spoke is concerned about the implications this bill has on the potential outcomes of regulated hunting and trapping. Much of the testimony you've heard skirts around the details of S.258, so I will do my best to outline my particular concerns within the bill.

In carefully reviewing S.258, this proposal does nothing more than opens the door to allow those groups who vehemently oppose and have made public their mission statements to end hunting and trapping fulfill their agenda of infiltrating state wildlife commissions to settle into positions to influence the rulemaking process. Their infiltration is not unique to Vermont as these animal rights and anti-hunting movements are sweeping the country, just look at what has happened in Colorado and Washington. If passed, this committee will be responsible for turning our precious wildlife resources into a pawn in a political game which will only further perpetuate the wildlife wars in Vermont.

S.258 is a deliberate and pervasive attack against hunters and trappers in an attempt to diminish and potentially reduce the authority of the Fish & Wildlife Dept and the current board and their ability to create and amend hunting and trapping laws. I'm not sure if this committee understands that the sole purview of the current Board is in reviewing hunting, fishing, and trapping laws only, nothing else. The Dept and legislation are the ones making laws and regulations about non-game, endangered species, habitat transactions, not the Board. Essentially, this harmful bill attempts to fix a problem that simply does not exist. S.258 is written to transfer all authority from the Dept to a new Board, and I don't believe that is a wise and well-planned decision.

The Dept and the Board have a long track record of success in their existing arrangement. Their work carries out the mission of the Dept by protecting wildlife in the best interests of all Vermonters. The Dept already has diverse working groups with internal and external stakeholders lead the state's leading experts in their fields to manage game and non-game wildlife. The current board already serves in an advisory capacity to the Dept, and the Dept and the existing board already include public comment and take testimony from the public on both sides of an issue. I have several complaints about the language of the new board, especially

around how the new board will “implement Dept policy and rules.” Does this mean hunting and trapping laws, along with endangered species, land acquisition, and non-game management? It seems as if your proposal gives full decision-making authority to the new board, which should not be. This would be an unreasonable and unnecessary ask for the Dept to stop their process and appease the new board on every policy issue. A new advisory board should have no authority to solicit public comments on fish and wildlife regulations, and that designation should remain with the Dept. This bill transfers authority to the Dept, however, that is not true in any part, it puts the new board in ultimate authority. So, I’d also like to ask, how can this new board be defined as having an advisory capacity if the language in the proposal forces the Dept has to defend themselves and ultimately answer to the new board?

S.258 seeks to undermine the authority of the Dept and disrupt the current legislative process. Firstly, there is no need for extra steps of review and revision, there is already an established and successful set of checks and balances between the Dept, the board, the general public, and LCAR. Secondly, the assembly of the current board is the most democratic and fair way to assign individuals to represent Vermonters. This proposal by its very nature stands to give away a 2/3 majority voting to politically motivated, agenda-driven unlicensed, non-consumptive users who seek to end hunting and trapping. Thirdly, the Dept will be further burdened by the requirements of this proposal to provide extra training to new board members. If the new board of non-hunters and non-trappers will be setting hunting and trapping laws, why does the language not require them to become informed by taking hunter and trapper education like us license holders? The language defines their training but fails to include any reference regulated hunting, fishing, and trapping education There is nothing in the current language to suggest that a new board member would be even required to be a Vermont resident. Although there is nothing about S.258 I support, these are major oversights in the proposal.

I am also concerned why the removal of hunting coyotes with hounds is included in this bill. The Dept only recently (two months ago) implemented regulations to manage this form of hunting. Why should we ban this type of hunting before we’ve had any chance to monitor and report on how the new regulations have improved public safety and other citizen concerns? Coyotes are invasive and will continue to become an increasingly concern for property and public safety and hunting them with hounds is an effective way to manage their populations. I’d also like to remind the committee of the recent judicial ruling in support of hunting coyotes and that the Depts’ fulfilled their legislative intent with the new regulations.

Lastly, this bill has changed and been rewritten so many times I’m not even sure the authors and committees know what it was intended to do in the first place anymore. Please leave well enough alone and do not move forward with any part of S.258.

Thank you,

Chris Ingram