Testimony of Douglas Wright, Stamford, VT, regarding H. 460 04/13/2015

To the Vermont House Committee on Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources

My wife and I have been residents of Stamford, VT since 1978. I have hunted VT since 1964 and fished here since I was old enough to follow my father around. My working life involved full-time law enforcement and, later, the VT Department of Corrections from which I retired in 2012. We raised three sons in VT and currently have a pre-school granddaughter living in the state. I mention these points to illustrate that I have a strong interest in the welfare of VT's people and environment. However, I interpret H. 460 as a sledge hammer solution to a problem that may not be a problem.

There is no debate that lead is a potentially dangerous substance. The issue appears to be whether the consumption of game harvested with lead based bullets raises consumers' blood levels sufficiently to pose a danger.

This issue came to light in North Dakota in 2008 when dermatologist Dr. M. Cornitzer, X-rayed 100 packages of venison donated to a food bank. 58-packages were found to contain lead. As a result, North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin pulled donated venison from their food banks.

Samples of the venison screened by Dr. Cornitzer were submitted to an Iowa lab for testing. Rick Kelly, the official responsible for testing was quoted: "I think North Dakota is drawing the wrong conclusions. We did what they asked, but they did not take an arbitrary sample".

The Iowa Department of Health tested residents' blood lead levels for over 15-years. Results: "IDPH maintains that if lead in venison were a serious health risk, it would have likely surfaced within extensive blood testing since 1992 with 500,000 youth under 6 and 25,000 adults having been screened". Iowa has never had a case of elevated blood lead levels caused by consuming harvested game.

Blood levels are expressed in micrograms of lead per deciliter. The U.S.CDC recommends case management for blood levels of 10 micrograms per deciliter or greater. The VT Department of Health, in 2008, set a standard of 5 micrograms per deciliter or greater as an elevated blood lead level. As of 2008, the average blood level in the U.S. population was 1.6 micrograms per deciliter.

In 2008, the CDC conducted a study involving a population from North Dakota. Participants were asked to self-report historical consumption of game meat and participation in other activities associated with blood lead levels. The study group's blood lead level averaged 1.17 micrograms of lead per deciliter; lower than either the CDC's or State of Vermont's "elevated level" standards. The study's authors noted: "…the clinical significance of low PbB (blood lead level) in the sample population and the small sample of 0.30 micrograms per deciliter associated should be interpreted within the context of naturally occurring PbB".

In a 2008 meeting consisting of representatives from Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota and North Dakota reached the following conclusion: "While no illnesses have been linked to consumption of fragments from lead ammunition, harvested deer **may** contain lead particles".

This writer reviewed 2014 deer hunting regulations on the websites of the North Dakota, Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources. It is interesting to note that **none** of these states have banned lead based bullets. Rather, Wisconsin and Minnesota have included information to allow hunters to make an informed decision regarding the use of lead based bullets and consumption of game taken. The following is taken from p. 18 of the 2014 Wisconsin Deer Hunting Regulations:

Lead in Venison

"Deer harvested with lead bullets have been shown to have tiny fragments remaining in processed meat. Often fragments are too small to be seen and can dispense far from the wound channel. Although the amount of lead found in samples of venison is small, studies suggest that long-term effects could occur in people who regularly eat venison harvested with lead ammunition. ***However, there is currently no evidence linking human consumption of venison to lead poisoning.***

To help reduce the risk of lead exposure from venison:

Consider alternative non-lead expanding ammunition such as copper or other high weight retention lead bullets such as bonded bullets.

Practice marksmanship and outdoor skills to get closer to your target and make cleaner, lethal shots away from major muscle areas. Aim for the vitals behind the shoulder or the neck.

Avoid consuming internal organs as they can contain extra lead from heart-lung shots.

Process small batches so you can frequently check the grinder and remove lead fragments. Remind your processor not to use deer meat with excessive shot damage. Trim a generous distance away from the wound channel and discard any meat that is bruised, discolored, or contains hair, dirt, bone fragments, or grass".

The Minnesota ***Tips for Deer Hunters*** notes *"Lead in venison has not been linked to any illnesses".* It includes similar suggestions to Wisconsin's site as well as information on bullet choices and processing (i.e. "…ground venison tends to contain the most lead"). The site concludes by advising the DNR conducted its lead fragmentation study to provide hunters with information "…on which they can make informed sources".

It should also be noted that the venison donation programs in the above states are again operating. North Dakota's "Sportsmen Against Hunger" donation program resumed operation in 2009.

Moving this discussion from the Midwest back to VT, the *2013 Vermont Department of Health Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Annual Report* regarding young children reports:

"Over the past ten years the percentage of young children screened has gone up and the percentage of children with elevated blood levels has decreased".

This writer reviewed several of the VT Department of Health's website pages discussing lead but could not find any concern expressed regarding the consumption of game taken with lead ammunition. I also sent an e-mail information request regarding this subject but have as yet received no response.

It should also be noted that in addition to being found the safest state in the nation, VT was also recently found to be the third healthiest state.

H. 460 notes the threat of lead ammunition to wildlife but recent VT conservation successes questions the degree of this threat.

The *VT AUDUBON* website reports:

- Since the release of 93 peregrine falcons in VT from 1982 – 1987, they attained a sufficient population to warrant their removal from the VT endangered species list
- Between 2004 – 2006, 29-pairs of bald eagles have been released in VT. This winter, 30 adults, 20 immature birds and 1 unknown were sighted along VT's standard survey routes. This is up from a total of 30-eagles spotted in 2010. VT is close to removing the bald eagle from its endangered species list.
- Since 1988, the Common Tern Project has witnessed a 300% increase in the number of these birds.

A *Burlington Free Press* article of 07/22/14, *Loon Rebounding in Vermont,* reports that over the past 30-years loon numbers in VT's lakes and ponds has risen from a couple dozen to over 300 adults. As recently as 15-years ago, there were only about 100-loons. Eric Hanson, coordinator of the VT Loon Conservation Project noted, "It's a decent population".

H. 460 as introduced does not mention the contributions of VT's hunters to conservation and to the VT economy in general. Should funds from the purchase of licenses or tax revenues from the sale of hunting and fishing gear (Pittman-Robertson) be reduced a very negative impact on state conservation and wildlife programs would be felt. Restricting hunters to so-called non-toxic ammunition would greatly increase the cost of ammunition to sportsmen while limiting availability. California sportsmen interviewed regarding that state's recent banning of lead ammunition for hunting indicated the increased cost would likely lessen or completely end their participation in hunting in that state.

Using the .308 Winchester 150-grain round as an example, this writer checked costs at Midsouth Shooters Supply and Natchez Shooters Supply. Both are large mail order businesses. The Hornady *American Whitetail* sells for $22.29, their *Custom Interlock* sells for $28.89 while their *GMX,* which would qualify as a non-toxic load retailed for $42.79 for a box of twenty. Remington's well-regarded *Core-Lokt* sells for $24.99 while their *Copper Solid* sells for $56.99 for a box of twenty. The Barnes *VOR-TX* solid copper rounds sell for $40.00 for a box of twenty. Clearly, use of lead free ammo would increase the financial burden on hunters. Many tried-and-true selections used by VT hunters for decades and commonly available (Remington Core-Lokt, Winchester Power Point etc.) would be illegal.

Page 62 of *Vermont's 2015 Vermont Fish and Wildlife Regulations* discusses mercury as well as lead. It advises that mercury has been found at levels exceeding health guidelines in fresh water fish. Readers are

referred to websites allowing them to make informed decisions regarding consumption. This writer notes no one is proposing legislation banning possession and consumption of fish caught in VT waters due to health concerns.

In summary, lead from bullets used to take game **has not been linked to any illnesses**. There are a number of steps that can be taken (i.e. proper processing of game meat) to lessen the presence of bullet fragments in game. The VT Department of Health reports decreasing incidents of elevated blood lead levels. Despite the continued use of lead based ammunition, species such as loons and bald eagles have increased and continue to do so. VT sportsmen would be negatively and unfairly impacted if restricted to lead free bullets. This could result in lessened participation in hunting and shooting with subsequent loss of funds to the state's conservation efforts and economy in general.

Rather than seek a legislative solution to a problem that may not exist, the education of hunters, such as demonstrated by the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, might be a better solution. Provide VT's hunters with pertinent information and allow them to make informed decisions.

Thank you.