



H. 31 – Vermont Suppressor Hunting

Legislative Objective

H. 31 seeks to legalize the use of suppressors while hunting in Vermont. Introduced by Rep. Patrick Brennan (R–Chittenden) and Rep. George Till (D–Chittenden), it has been referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife.

Suppressor Basics

Suppressors are legal to own in 42 states, 40 of which allow their use while hunting. Vermont and Connecticut are the only two states where suppressors are legal to own, but not to use while hunting. They have been federally regulated since the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934. In order to purchase a suppressor, prospective buyers must live in a state where suppressors are legal, send in an application including fingerprints and passport photos to the ATF, pay a \$200 transfer tax, notify their local Chief Law Enforcement Officer (CLEO), and wait for an indeterminate amount of time for the ATF to process the application. As of February, 2018, wait times range from 5 to 14 months.

Suppressors are one of the most misunderstood tools in existence. The majority of Americans believe that suppressors fully silence the noise of a gunshot. This notion is unequivocally false. The primary root of this misconception comes from film, where fictional characters like James Bond are able to use a suppressor to shoot without noise. Hollywood's depiction of suppressors does not have any basis in reality, creating an understandably false expectation of what suppressors actually do. Interestingly enough, many countries in Europe, including the UK, the very country that gives us James Bond, encourage their hunters to utilize suppressors in order to reduce noise pollution and help protect hearing.

The terms “silencer” and “suppressor” refer to the same thing – a muffler for a firearm. It is important to note that nothing can actually silence the noise of a gunshot. Physics will not allow it, as there are too many variables that suppressors do not affect. In reality, suppressors work in the same manner as mufflers on cars, which function by trapping hot expanding gasses and allowing them to slowly cool, thereby reducing the noise to safer levels.

On average, suppressors reduce the noise of a gunshot by 20 – 35 decibels (dB), roughly the same sound reduction as earplugs or earmuffs. Even the most effective suppressors on the market, on the smallest and quietest calibers, like .22 LR, reduce the peak sound level of a gunshot to around 110 – 120 decibels. To put that in perspective, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), that is as loud as a jackhammer (110 dB) or an ambulance siren (120 dB).

Hearing Conservation

From a hearing conservation perspective, according to Dr. William W. Clark, the current Director of the Washington University School of Medicine's Program in Audiology and Communication Sciences, “the most serious threat to hearing comes from recreational hunting or target shooting”.¹ This is in large part due to the fact that many people choose not to use traditional hearing protection devices like earplugs and earmuffs. Multiple studies have found that between 70 to 80% of hunters never wear earplugs or earmuffs, and nearly half of all target shooters don't consistently wear traditional hearing protection.^{2,3} Thus, it should come as no surprise that for every five years of hunting, hunters become seven percent more likely to experience high frequency hearing loss.⁴



In a 2011 study, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated, “the only potentially effective noise control method to reduce students’ or instructors’ noise exposure from gunfire is through the use of noise suppressors that can be attached to the end of the gun barrel. However, some states do not permit civilians to use suppressors on firearms.”⁵

In a similar study from 2014 on noise exposure at shooting ranges, NIOSH recommended, “if feasible and legally permissible, attach noise suppressors to firearms to reduce peak sound pressure levels.”⁶

In March, 2017, the National Hearing Conservation Association’s Task Force on Prevention of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss from Firearm Noise stated that “using firearms equipped with suppressors” is one of “several strategies [that] can be employed to reduce the risk of acquiring NIHL and associated tinnitus from firearm noise exposure.”⁷

Bipartisan Support

In 2013, Montana Governor Steve Bullock held the common misconception that suppressors could silence a firearm, which led him to veto suppressor hunting legislation in his state. However, once he became properly educated on the issue, he reversed course and urged the Montana legislature to legalize their use in the field. In a letter to the Speaker of the House from March, 2015, he wrote:

“The public perception of suppressors as the same thing as silencers, where the assassin quietly dispatches his victim, no longer holds true. Suppressors mitigate the sound of a shot, but do not silence it. The use of suppressors for hunting, when hunters cannot wear ear protection because they need to be aware of their surroundings, can help protect against hearing loss. This is especially true for our younger hunters, even those who are not actually hunting but are accompanying their parent in the field.

I understand the concerns regarding the risks of increased poaching and do not take this lightly, but other states have not found this to be the case.”

Gov. Bullock’s change of opinion wasn’t ideological, it was educational. Unlike many firearms issues, pro-suppressor reform has received a tremendous amount of bipartisan support across the country. In the past three years, three Democratic Governors have signed standalone pro-suppressor bills into law - Gov. Steve Bullock (MT) in 2015, Gov. Peter Shumlin (VT) in 2015, and Gov. Maggie Hassan (NH) in 2016.

Conclusion

Because most hunters do not wear hearing protection in the field, they are highly susceptible to preventable hearing damage. By supporting H. 31, you are doing your part to give sportsmen and women in Vermont the option to use suppressors while hunting, ensuring that future generations will no longer have to choose between their passion and their hearing.

¹ Clark WW. (1991) Noise exposure from leisure activities: a review. *J Acoust Soc Am* 90(1):175–181.

²Wagner A, Stewart M, Lehman ME. (2006) Risk patterns and shooting habits of recreational firearm users. In: Abstracts of the National Hearing Conservation Association Annual Conference 2006, Tampa, Florida. *NHCA Spectrum* 23(Suppl. 1):28.

³ Stewart M, Foley L, Lehman ME, Gerlach A. (2011) Risks Faced by Recreational Firearm Users. *Audiology Today*, March-April:38–52.

⁴ Chen L, Brueck SE. (2011) Noise and Lead Exposures at an Outdoor Firing Range — California. *Health Hazard Evaluation Report HETA 2011-0069-3140:5*.

⁵ Brueck SE, Kardous CA, Oza A, Murphy WJ. (2014) Measurement of Exposure to Impulsive Noise at Indoor and Outdoor Firing Ranges during Tactical Training Exercises. *Health Hazard Evaluation Report HETA 2013-0124-3208:14*.

⁶ Murphy S, Meinke DK, Flamme GA, Murphy WJ, Finan DS, Lankford, JE, Tasko SM. (2017) *NHCA Position Statement: Recreational Firearm Noise. NHCA Task Force on Prevention of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss from Firearm Noise: 1*.