

H-60 Testimony given verbally on Feb 17, 2017

Greetings Chairman Deen and Greetings to Everyone,

My name is Melissa Hoffman. My wife and I own and steward a 1300 farm in Huntington dedicated to integrating wildlife into our food production systems. I moved to Vermont in 1994 to start an organic vegetable farm in New Haven, left for several years, then returned in 2003 to live where we now reside. Since 2003, we have consulted and worked closely with different wildlife ecologists, particularly Sue Morse, in the design of our food system and in developing a management plan for our forests. We have worked with foresters Pat Bartlett and David Brynn, and professional ecologists Amy Seidl, Marc Lapin, Brett Engstromm, and Brien Pfeiffer as well as students from the UVM Ecological Design Master's program. We enjoy vibrant populations of coyote, fox, mink, fisher, weasel, rabbits, bobcat, deer, turkey, moose and bear on our property. I am also here to represent the Vermont Coyote Coexistence Coalition, an ad hoc group of Vermont citizens, whose aim is to educate, create awareness, and promote ethical and sustainable coexistence with coyotes/coywolves in our state.

We appreciate the introduction of H-60 and want to echo other testimony that advises consulting with independent biologists and wildlife ecologists along with a wide spectrum of Vermont's farmers, growers, prey-species-only hunters, and non-consumptive citizens, as you weigh and shape this legislation. We also advocate against killing contests, hunting with hounds, and the use of calling devices.

As you know in addition to livestock farming, Vermont is home to a diversity of farmers, orchardists, nurseries, agroforesters, as well as a burgeoning number of fruit, vegetable, and mushroom growers, all who benefit concretely, practically, and **financially** from the presence of stable coyote families. I want to emphasize the word 'stable' here, as understanding this nuance beyond the superficial measure of 'numbers' is key in forming sound policy. "Stable numbers" do not equal stable family groups. Stable family units know and maintain their territory. Only one female in any given territory will give birth. A mated pair will teach their young where to hunt, including which places to avoid. Disrupt that family unit, and you disrupt that knowledge flow. Disrupt that family unit and you stimulate juveniles to breed early to compensate for those killed. The stable family unit on our farm both helps us immensely, and doesn't bother us, or our flock of ducks. A mated pair will pass that valued knowledge and stability on to future generations within the territory—thus assuring ongoing ease of coexistence. A mated pair will pass that valuable knowledge and stability on to future generations within the territory—thus assuring ongoing ease of coexistence.

How else do we and our farm benefit?

As you all likely know, voles girdle young fruit trees. Rabbits will browse perennial shrubs and eat vegetables. Raccoons will eat corn (and harm chickens). Woodchucks will eat root vegetables and potatoes in addition to many other crops. Coyotes keep all of these animals in proper balance, and the more abundant these prey animals are, the less need for coyotes to seek food elsewhere—which helps everybody, including farmers who keep livestock. One strategy we use, for example, is to keep areas of unmown pasture over the winter which provides rodent habitat, and thus abundant hunting grounds for predators during that time of year when food is less

plentiful. We take pride in a sensitive and inclusive land stewardship model, which has been hardwon. We often share this information with others.

As you contemplate establishing a closed season on coyotes, I think it would be smart and forward-thinking to pair a restricted coyote season with up-levelled educational efforts that include proven land and farm management strategies for **coexistence**—strategies that reduce and prevent incidents in the first place. For example, livestock farmers need to properly dispose of dead animals, remove food attractants, can use mules or guard dogs, and benefit from mobile electric fencing--which coyotes hate. There are growing numbers of farmers with proven success in **preventing** incidents, farmers whose experience and knowledge base can those who might find coyotes problematic, or who might not know how they themselves might be generating a problem.

Such educational efforts should also involve educating the coyote-hunting community and correcting so many of the mis-perceptions often cited as motivation for killing them; the mistaken perception that they are invasive, for example. The mistaken perception that killing them will lessen their numbers or preseve overall deer populations . The mistaken perception that they are **all** bad and in need of killing. All such perceptions motivate a very dedicated group who like to get together and kill as many coyotes as possible as often as possible, or who will simply kill a coyote on site while engaged in other activities or hunts. While this may not characerize the larger proportion of hunters, these coyote hunters do a lot of damage and disrupt the otherwise dignified reputation of biologically-informed, ethical hunters in Vermont. It's important also address the randomness of killing **all** coyotes vs specific individuals that might be causing chronic, unwanted incidents.

Vermont can lead with smart and progressive policies that inspire and reflect the vitality of our natural systems, express innovation in our land stewardship and farming policies by understanding predators more fully as a citizenry, taking the lead in preventing negative wildlife interactions, and in reversing outdated, unnuanced, and harmful practices such as we have now in the form of an open season on coyotes.

As we speak, several of us are at work developing a list of 'pro-predator' farmers who demonstrate good wildlife stewardship alongside sustainable food production. Vermont policy can capitalize on such efforts as this, while simultaneously preserving its healthiest and smartest traditions. Please let me or VCCC know if we can be of further help.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address you, and for your good work,

Melissa Hoffman
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