

Testimony:

I am neither here today to represent any of the organizations I am associated with, nor to take a position on this bill, simply to note a number of concerns I see in the recent amendments to it.

Initially, the idea of allowing folks who post their land "Hunting By Permission Only" to be in the preferred landowner drawing for doe permits will likely result in folks using those posters and simply not granting anyone permission. This will exacerbate the difficulty of managing the herd in some parts of the state, and further reduce opportunities for some hunters.

The desire to require reporting of every animal caught takes us back about 20 years. At one time, animals taken in defense of property were required to be sealed, the equivalent of the certificate required by this legislation. Animals taken in season were sealed with a steel wire, while animals taken in defense of property were sealed with a copper wire. This was not found to provide significant value to the department, and wasted a significant amount of the wardens time which is better used stewarding Vermont's wildlife resources than running errands, so it was done away with. Trappers are already required to seal the pelts and surrender the carcasses of our three CITES species (otter, bobcat, and fisher), which has a biological basis. Vermont has decades of data on these species, and our Department is widely considered the most knowledgeable on fisher in North America, and perhaps the world. At such times as research is going on with any species, biologists reach out to the trapping community for specimens of any species, and the Vermont Trappers Association has a history of partnering with the Department, so these resources are readily available when there is a need.

On catch of domestic animals, this is not the common issue that those opposed to trapping would have you believe. When someone's pet is caught, it generally makes the news. How often do we truly see these stories? The disjoint here is that the trapper is often blamed. State law contends that folks are responsible for their animals, whether that be a pet or livestock. In 2015 a motorist was killed by an impact with a loose bull. The owner of the bull was held liable as state law requires that proper fencing be maintained. Similarly, state law requires pet owners to maintain control of their pets. If one's dog gets loose and takes a stroll we hold the dog's owner accountable for any damage the dog causes. This is the same thing. The trapper must have landowner permission to set his traps. Often they are there at the request of the landowner. When there is a conflict with a domestic animal caught, the landowner often doesn't know the animal is using their property. When we accept the idea that the lawfully operating trapper is somehow at fault here, we are taking a position counter to what existing law and common sense dictate. These livestock and pet control laws are in place as a matter of public safety. Poorly controlled domestic animals can cause significant problems for wildlife, farmers, and communities; as well as unfortunately subjecting their owners to fines and occasionally lawsuits.

To the subject of requiring a special "nuisance trapping" class. The state has over 600 licensed, trained trappers active in any given year. Why would we direct the Department to expend resources on further training and regulation? Every warden has trappers within their jurisdiction whom they can trust to mitigate animal damage issues. When there is a problem, landowners often call the warden. This isn't willy-nilly. Trappers assess the situation and if there is a better way to mitigate the problem they commonly offer alternatives. Trappers are passionate, and would rather keep animals on the landscape until the season is on and fur is prime when possible.

They are intimately familiar with the habits, needs, and behaviors of the animals they pursue which gives them unique insight. They must be, because while a hunter needs to get within 30-40 yards of their prey with a bow, and can succeed with a gun at a range of hundreds of yards; the trapper must entice that animal which has the whole world to walk upon to place its foot on two specific square inches of the planet. They can identify if there is a real problem, or simply a perceived one, and can explain the difference to a homeowner, as can the warden upon initial contact. I would submit that we have no need to complicate a well functioning system at the expense of department resources. I daresay that this would make it harder and more costly for landowners to get damage issues mitigated.

In a recent "Across the Fence" episode, Biologist Kim Royar noted that "Coydogs" (the common vernacular for crosses between coyotes and domestics) don't do well because domestic dogs can breed at any time. When they crossbreed, any female offspring can breed at any time. The males will breed them when they come into heat often resulting in pups born at inopportune times with little chance for survival.

Coyotes breeding necessarily coincides with the need for spring birthing. Like all wildlife they must conceive when conditions are optimal.

This denies the concept of "compensatory reproduction" as put forth by those opposed to coyote hunting. They do not "breed more when hunted." The basis for the idea, larger litters, is readily explained. With more coyotes on the landscape, resources are less readily available to the individual. An animal competing harder for the same resource cannot be expected to have the same rate of fecundity as a healthier animal which is under less stress from competition. In short, too many coyotes leads to unhealthy coyotes who can't carry or provide for their pups as well. This was noted in a 2005 paper written by Eric Gese (USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Services, National Wildlife Research Center, Logan, UT, USA), and published by the University of Nebraska. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/04c2/8d240648f4647483ce4edb34acd903181ba5.pdf>

"Coyote litter size is usually related to food abundance. Todd and Keith (1983) reported that coyote pregnancy rate and litter size declined when snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*) populations declined in Alberta. Gier (1968) noted that 65% of the yearlings conceived during years of rodent abundance, whereas no yearlings bred during years of rodent scarcity. Clark (1972) reported that more yearlings bred and litter sizes were larger during years of jackrabbit (*L. californicus*) abundance. We suggest that the lower density of coyotes in the removal area and the increased prey availability to the surviving female coyotes, brought about an increase in their reproductive capabilities (Knowlton 1972, Henderson 1972, Connolly and Longhurst 1975). The mechanism by which this occurs is unknown, but may be a consequence of the breeding females acquiring more food due to more prey and reduced competition, entering estrus in better physiological condition, shedding more ova entering estrus, and producing more offspring.

While it has been suggested that human exploitation brings about more coyotes due to increased litter size, we point out that the observed increase in litter size during this study did not increase overall coyote density, but simply replaced the removed cohort. Increased reproduction must be considered in the context of a reduced population, and the upper threshold of coyote density is still dictated by food abundance as mediated by social tolerance (Knowlton et al. 1999). In addition, some coyote populations with abundant food resources and no human exploitation are

already at the maximum reproductive output (e.g., Gese et al. 1996) and the breeding females would not be physically capable of increasing litter size."

Wouldn't we rather manage this population for healthier animals that exist within the carrying capacity, both natural and social, than allow them to proliferate to their own detriment? It is the responsible approach. Just within the last two years we had an outbreak of canine distemper. Aphis was receiving 20 to 30 animals a week through most of the summer. These animals were dying a pretty horrific death. I had to dispatch two of them. This was my first experience with the disease, and it is very unpleasant. Distemper is a density dependent disease, which is evidence that we already have a surplus on the landscape which is not being reduced enough. The occurrence of mange throughout portions of the state is further evidence of this. Attempting to reduce hunting of a population that has already exceeded its capacity is inappropriate. Additionally, our current open season is in line with 42 other states. When we consider that they do not inhabit Hawaii and are not as common on the landscape in Alaska as the lower 48 states, this becomes even slightly more significant. It is clear that current hunting seasons are not negative population drivers, therefore there is no reason to seek further restriction of the current management policies. In short, there is no need for a closed season.

As to the perceived "need" to eliminate coyote contests, I would ask this committee to be open to a different idea. Per the aforementioned study, it has been concluded that in order to effectively reduce coyote numbers in the long term, and in the absence of sharp declines in their prey base, there needs to be a sustained harvest of 60-70% of the population over the course of years. This is simply not occurring. I recently spoke with the organizer of the coyote hunt in Bristol last year and he indicated that 15-20 participants only succeeded in harvesting a total of 4 coyotes collectively over the course of a two day hunt. A more recent coyote contest was cancelled due to a lack of participation. Where is this an unbearable strain on the population? The hyperbole that these contests result in some type of mass slaughter is not borne out in practice. I'm sure you've been shown pictures from western hunts of stacks of coyotes, but this is simply not reality in Vermont, and these hunts are not negatively impacting our coyotes. Granted, some folks have posted statements and pictures in poor taste on social media. When we consider that many of them have been personally attacked; their pictures and names tossed about social media by those opposed to coyote hunting with statements such as, "Photograph and shame them as much as possible.", and "Coyote killer ___ ___ was spotted driving through the area of...", we can begin to grasp why some of this has occurred. This approach by those who oppose coyote hunting has been the norm. For example, a gentleman spoke briefly and passionately to this very committee last Thursday, and on Friday his name and picture were posted on the social media pages of multiple organizations supporting this amended version of H.636. Some of the hunters subjected to this treatment are simply lashing out at folks who are engaged in attacking what has, for them, been an important aspect of their lives. This does not necessarily excuse their poorly conceived response, but it certainly explains it.

Thank you,
Mike Covey
Williamstown, VT