

I want to answer some questions that were raised in other testimony – why change the FWB, why change what’s working?

I think it’s easy for some to say the system is working when they are the ones who have authority to set rules, or if their views are represented by those who do. But for many of us, the current system does not represent us or provide a way to have meaningful input.

This change is necessary because communication between the hunting and trapping community, and wildlife advocates in Vermont is not working.

Change is hard. I recognize that those who are satisfied with the current FWB feel that changes will give up control over important aspects of their lives. They worry that their concerns will be diminished, their voices no longer heard.

I also have concerns. Speaking honestly, as a wildlife advocate at times has been critical of the Department’s policies, it is a bit of a leap of faith to put all rulemaking authority with the Department. But overall, I respect the professional expertise of the Department staff and believe we share a common desire to protect Vermont’s wildlife.

We all know that the level of discourse in our country has deteriorated, exacerbated by politicians, media personalities and social media that make name-calling and insults acceptable conduct.

A common means of “talking” to one another is through editorials and social media posts. Someone writes an opinion letter or a post, someone else responds, and it ping pongs back and forth a bit, then dies out, until the next letter or post.

Another means of “talking” is through public comment. FWB meetings have a comment period, the Department takes public comment. And there were working groups for the BMP and coyote rule. But when wildlife advocates do not see their comment and participation reflected in meaningful actions, it feels like token and meaningless consultation.

To my mind, one of the most important changes S.258 makes to the FWB is the opportunity it will provide for regular communication among people of different backgrounds and experiences, who have equal authority to participate and advise on wildlife management issues.

And I say this based on decades of experience working with multi-stakeholder groups. I have seen individuals with vastly different backgrounds work effectively together, and solve problems together. And through the process develop respect and trust in each other.

The challenges facing Vermont’s wildlife are significant and changing – chronic wasting disease, pesticide poisoning from rodenticides, habitat changes from development and a changing climate to name just a few.

There are and will be differences of opinion and difficult discussions about how to best address these challenges. But in the words of a mediator friend, there are ways to “disagree better”.

The revised FWB restructures the system and provides a means to have these discussions, that does not currently exist. It will help us manage the challenges facing wildlife in the years ahead, to achieve a common goal – the health of Vermont’s wildlife.