

## **H. 166 – The Hound Safety Bill**

### **Legislative Brief: Public Safety Concerns Related to Hunting Hounds & Pack Attacks**

#### **Why Regulation is Necessary**

There have been multiple documented attacks on humans, pets, livestock, and non-target animals by hounds pursuing black bears and furbearers (bobcats, coyotes, foxes, and raccoons). While highly-trained dogs in obedience can be recalled under minimal distractions, controlling multiple off-leash hounds in pursuit of prey or during a predatory attack is not possible. The severity and unpredictability of pack attacks create a critical need for legislation.

- Public safety is at risk when strong, prey-driven dogs run in packs, off-leash, and unsupervised.
- Repeated trespassing by hound hunters causes ongoing conflicts with property owners.
- Extended hound hunting seasons (e.g., 10 months for bobcats and foxes, 6 months for bears, 8 months for coyotes, and 7 months for raccoons) means increased opportunities for conflicts and attacks.

#### **Key Points**

- H. 166 addresses public safety concerns stemming from uncontrolled hounds running at large, out of sight, and beyond hearing range of handlers.
- H. 166 redefines “control” and “accompanying” to require direct, physical proximity between handlers and hounds, reducing risks and ensuring accountability.
- The bill addresses landowner concerns by reducing trespassing incidents through mandated physical proximity of handlers to hounds.

#### **Severity of Hound Attacks & Predatory Aggression**

- Hounds used to hunt black bears and furbearers are powerful and bred to have a high prey drive and endurance.
- Multiple dogs are needed since bears and furbearers can seriously injure the hounds while trying to defend themselves and offspring.
- The combined strength of multiple large dogs easily overwhelms large targets.
- Dogs in a pack prioritize packmates over any attention given to a handler.
- Dogs become more aggressive in packs, and predatory aggression worsens the more a dog engages in chasing and attacking prey.
- Dogs in a pack take on specific roles (e.g., chasing, blocking escape routes) during predatory events. This coordinated and rapid communication between pack members leads to synchronized behavior, making human intervention nearly impossible to time effectively.

- Pack attacks cause serious injuries to victims and can be fatal.
- No safe intervention protocols exist.

### **Control & Training Limitations**

- Encouraging predatory behavior is in direct conflict with obedience training and control.
- Predatory aggression suppresses a dog's ability to hear and respond to commands.
- Coonhounds and foxhounds are trained to attack and kill large prey. They bark and bay loudly when in pursuit.
- Multiple hounds running off-leash after prey cannot be controlled through verbal commands or remote equipment.
- Electronic training devices (e-collars) and remote equipment fail to:
  - Prevent predatory attacks by off-leash dogs.
  - Prevent hound hunters from trespassing on private property.
  - Recall multiple dogs during pursuit.
  - Prevent human injury during attacks.
  - Control pack attack behavior or stop an active pack attack.
- No verified safe distance exists for recalling multiple dogs during a predatory chase or attack.
- GPS tracking is not a control mechanism.

### **Public Safety Risks**

- Attacks on people, companions animals, and livestock on both public and private property.
- Lack of control by handlers increases the severity and intensity of predatory attacks and dog bites.
- Human intervention during pack attacks is dangerous due to potential redirected aggression toward the person trying to intervene.
- Injuries from pack attacks are serious and can be fatal.

### **Reporting Concerns & Property Rights**

- Multiple property owners report frequent trespassing and disregard for property rights by hound hunters.
- Underreporting of incidents because releasing hounds to run at large is legal and there are legitimate concerns of retaliation from hound hunters.
- Lack of disclosure by VT Fish and Wildlife regarding hound attacks and trespassing complaints. F&W repeatedly charges for FOI requests regarding hound hunting incidents.

## Anticipated Questions and Responses for Lawmakers

### **Q: Does this ban hunting with dogs?**

**A:** H. 166 does *not* ban hunting with dogs. It strengthens safety standards to ensure hunting practices using hounds are conducted responsibly and do not endanger people, pets, or property. GPS tracking alone is insufficient for control. Physical proximity is essential.

### **Q: How does H. 166 support public safety?**

**A:** It ensures that hounds are under the direct control of their handlers, preventing incidents where the dogs pose threats to people or pets. Predatory aggression, especially exhibited by a pack, is extremely dangerous.

### **Q: Does this legislation allow for traditional hunting practices?**

**A:** Yes. H. 166 explicitly ensures that hunting activities such as bird retrieval, flushing, rabbit hunting, and deer tracking can continue without disruption.

### **Q: What about landowner rights?**

**A:** H. 166 safeguards landowners, helping prevent uncontrolled hounds and their handlers from trespassing onto posted properties. The bill is designed to decrease the number of hunter-landowner conflicts in Vermont.

### **Q: Will this legislation require new enforcement resources?**

**A:** No significant new resources are needed. H. 166 clarifies existing definitions ensuring enforcement is easier under Vermont's current wildlife regulations.

### **Q: Why should hound hunters pursuing black bears and furbearers post signs and notify town officials of the number and breeds of dogs they release?**

**A:** Vermont Fish and Wildlife requires property owners to buy signs, register their land, and maintain postings annually, with no exceptions or assistance—even for disabled landowners. Any mistakes invalidate all postings, making the process costly and burdensome. Hound hunters can post signs and share in the duty of submitting documentation to town officials, improving safety and accountability.