

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 866**

**“An Act to Reduce Posting of Hunting Lands by Providing Free Antlerless Deer
Permits to Certain Landowners Who Keep Their Lands Open to Hunting”**

Presented by: Representative FOSTER of Dexter.

Cosponsored by: Senator BLACK of Franklin and Representatives: DILL of Old Town,
FLYNN of Albion, MASON of Lisbon, PERKINS of Dover-Foxcroft, THORNE of
Carmel, WOOD of Greene, Senators: CYRWAY of Kennebec, HAGGAN of Penobscot.

DATE OF HEARING: March 17, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Nate Webb, Wildlife Division Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in opposition to **L.D. 866**.

This bill amends the law governing the antlerless deer permit lottery to provide that a landowner who keeps their land open to hunting by the public and receives an antlerless deer permit via the lottery will not be charged for that permit. Such a landowner that does not receive a permit via the lottery but purchases a permit or permits through the website will not be charged for one of their permits.

We recognize the very important role that landowners play in ensuring land access for hunting and other recreation and currently offer many unique benefits to landowners. Qualifying landowners are eligible for up to 25% of the available antlerless deer permits in open districts before the general lottery takes place for that district. If a landowner applicant fails to get an antlerless permit from the allotted landowner permits in that district, they will be placed in the general lottery and afforded an additional opportunity to be awarded a permit. This provides landowners with a significantly improved chance of receiving a permit, particularly in WMDs with limited permit numbers. Additionally, in some situations, a Maine landowner is allowed to hunt on their property without purchasing a hunting license. This currently applies to landowners hunting on their own property if they are legally domiciled on the property, it exceeds 10 acres, and it is used for agricultural purposes. A bill was proposed this session that would remove the requirement that the land be used for agricultural purposes and increase opportunities for landowners to hunt on their own property without a license.

The Department also offers several programs to assist landowners with land and wildlife management on private properties. The Outdoor Partners Program is administered by the Maine Warden Service and partners with landowners on use, access, and enforcement issues related to private lands, boundaries and signage, and property maintenance. A Landowner Appreciation Day is held annually and has hosted clean-up work on over 100 private properties resulting in the removal of over 1,000,000 lbs. of trash. The Beginning with Habitat program provides technical assistance and expertise on matters related to land and wildlife management planning on private properties, and the MDIFW Private Lands Biologist provided such assistance to nearly 1,200 unique landowner contacts in 2024. Finally, a Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) is in development to assist landowners experiencing deer conflicts by providing cost-sharing assistance for fencing and deterrents as well as additional deer removal options. This program will prioritize landowners experiencing financial losses related to deer damage and will be supported by the Deer Management Fund.

This bill would result in a negative fiscal impact of \$12 per permit issued to landowners. These funds would otherwise have been deposited into the Deer Management Fund, matched with federal funds at up to a 3:1 ratio, and used in efforts to acquire and manage deer habitat. Since changes were made to the Deer Management Fund in 2021 specifying that antlerless deer permit revenue is to be used for deer habitat acquisition and management, we have completed 6 projects in 4 areas totaling nearly 10,000 acres, all of which is open to public access. This fund represents an uncommon case where sportsmen and women are able to see and experience their conservation dollars at work, and this bill would significantly reduce revenue to this fund.

Finally, I would like to close by emphasizing that allowing landowners to receive a permit at no cost will likely open the door to efforts to exempt other groups in the future, such as youth, seniors, or veterans. When the new deer permit system was established by the 130th legislature, the \$12 fee for an additional antlerless deer was applied universally, with no exceptions for any one group. This ensures a level playing field for all hunters, ensures that everyone receiving a permit is willing to make a modest financial investment (thus increasing their likelihood of utilizing the permit), and generates funding for deer habitat conservation. We believe that exempting any one group from the fee requirement erodes the integrity of the antlerless deer permit system and will lead to additional requests to exempt other groups in the future.

I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.