

# Pennsylvania Legislator Sets Sights on Returning to Monday Deer Opener

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A Pennsylvania legislator recently outlined plans to introduce legislation to change the opening day of the firearms deer season from Saturday back to the Monday after Thanksgiving.

In a memorandum sent to all House members on Dec. 13, state Rep. Brian Smith, R-Punxsutawney, said he plans to introduce legislation in the near future to amend Title 34 and return the opening day of the antlered rifle deer season to the [Monday after Thanksgiving](#).

In 2019, the Pennsylvania Game Commission board voted to change the deer season opener from Monday to the first Saturday after Thanksgiving, and the move has generated much debate.

In his memorandum, Smith said the change had a financial impact on small businesses and volunteer organizations that relied on the weekend prior to the Monday start for a revenue boost. He also stated the change to Saturday took away family time during the holiday weekend as hunters left for camp immediately after Thanksgiving.

A hunter himself, Smith said he wasn't a proponent of changing the season opener to Saturday, but his decision to pursue legislation to bring back Monday was made after receiving an enormous amount of feedback.

"I've had hunters reach out to me, firemen who lost fundraising revenue from that weekend, and businesses," Smith said. "There was definitely an economic impact from not having hunters around that weekend when the opening day was changed to Saturday.

"Hunters patronized businesses and went to events held by fire departments and non-profits. That doesn't happen now."

In addition to the change back to Monday, Smith is proposing the rifle deer season run consecutively from Monday through the second Sunday, equating to a two-week season with no disruptions. Smith's proposal would add a second Sunday to the season, a move he said would present additional opportunity for hunters while affording them a total of four weekend days to hunt — the same amount offered under the current season structure.

Smith said he's never been a supporter of Sunday hunting, but he views [adding a second Sunday](#) to the rifle season as a compromise that keeps four weekend days open after a Monday start. Under his plan, the season would open on the first Monday after Thanksgiving and continue uninterrupted for 14 days, including two full weekends.

Since the memorandum was circulated, Smith said he has heard from legislators interested in signing on as co-sponsors.

“Legislators contacted me and said they’re getting calls from their constituents who want the Monday back. Other legislators are hearing this like I’ve been,” he said.

But in the state Senate, at least one legislator believes the Saturday opener should remain. According to state Sen. Dan Laughlin, R-Erie, the Saturday opener provides more opportunity for people to hunt, and it’s beneficial to those mentoring youths because they don’t have to worry about missing school or college classes. Laughlin expressed his support of the Saturday opener to the PGC board when it was considering the change in 2019, and he feels the move has been a positive.

“It doesn’t take anything away from the other hunters,” Laughlin said. “I think the weekend opener right after Thanksgiving is rapidly becoming the most popular hunting weekend in Pennsylvania. I’ve had countless people reach out and thank me for the Saturday opener.”

Rifle hunter numbers have declined, he added, due to the increasing popularity of archery season. If it wasn’t for the Saturday opener, Laughlin said, there would be even fewer hunters participating in the rifle season.

As far as Smith’s contention that businesses and non-profits have been negatively impacted by the Saturday opener, Laughlin said the Senate passed a bill last year that allows non-profits to hold online raffles, and the option has been a success for those groups.

Laughlin is also aware of the claim that the Saturday opener right after the Thanksgiving holiday presents a time crunch for hunters to make it out for opening day. "That's true to some extent," he said, "but these are personal choices for people to make."

One group of hunters believes the only suitable choice for the rifle opener is Monday, and they're working to get it changed back. Randy Santucci and Dan Davila founded the Facebook group "Pennsylvania Hunters Against the Saturday Deer Opener" and have gained more than 3,300 followers since it was created in March.

Santucci said the change to Saturday was a detriment to Pennsylvania hunting culture and the economics of small businesses, and it also goes against the majority opinion of hunters and research conducted by the PGC prior to the change.

When opening day was on Monday, he said, it preserved the deer season tradition that hunters cherish while also avoiding any conflicts with family time over Thanksgiving.

"That's a significant challenge. Hunting is going to suffer if you put it up against family time over Thanksgiving," Santucci said.

Although the Saturday opener has been in place for four seasons, Santucci said there are indicators that more hunters are turning against it. The growth of his Facebook group, which he said gained roughly 2,100 new members during deer season, and a recent poll conducted by the Senate Game and Fisheries Committee are just two examples of the opposition to Saturday, according to Santucci.

As of Dec. 19, the Game and Fisheries Committee poll garnered over 9,400 votes, with 58% in favor of a Monday opener and 42% preferring Saturday.

"Going into the fourth year, how could this possibly be viewed as a good idea if there's this much opposition?" Santucci said. "We get emails and calls about this on a daily basis from hunters and businesses."

Laughlin said he requested the poll be placed on the Game and Fisheries Committee Facebook page as a means of obtaining "a pulse of what's out there."

The poll isn't scientific, Laughlin added, and he did admit the aggregate favored a Monday opener. But when the poll was shared across other Facebook groups, the hunting pages with broad membership favored the Saturday opener, he said.

“I don’t think the Game Commission is going to make any drastic decisions based on this poll,” Laughlin said, adding that a 2021 survey of 2,009 hunters revealed 60% supported the Saturday opener while 27% opposed.

Smith said he’ll introduce his bill to change back to a Monday deer season opener as soon as the new legislative session begins Jan. 3. He hopes to move the bill to the House Game and Fisheries Committee for a hearing and a vote.

“With the amount of people talking about this, I’m optimistic we’ll get a hearing,” Smith said.

If the proposal does become law, Game Commission spokesman Travis Lau said the agency's board would have no role in the matter.

“If it’s written into law, the board doesn’t decide when the season opens and the season length won’t change, it will just start on a Monday,” he said.