



# Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen & Conservationists

2426 North Second St. • Harrisburg, PA 17110

Phone: 717-232-3480

info@pfsc.org • www.pfsc.org

On the Front Lines – So You Can Be in the Woods, On the Water or At the Range!

## Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Game & Fisheries Committee

### Testimony – Saturday versus Monday Rifle Deer Season Opener

February 3, 2025

Mike Kriner – Director of Government Affairs

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Chair Kulik, Chair Maloney, and distinguished members of the PA House Game & Fisheries Committee. My name is Mike Kriner. I've had the pleasure of serving the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen & Conservationists (PFSC) for the last four years as their Director of Government Affairs. Formed in 1932, the PFSC represents close to 70,000 sportsmen, sportswomen and conservationists throughout the Commonwealth.

The PFSC's mission is to provide increased hunting, fishing, trapping and conservation opportunities for our members. We support allowing the PA Game Commission to have full regulatory authority over setting hunting seasons and bag limits for our wildlife. We believe the PA Game Commission's decision to set the opening day for the 2025 rifle deer season to Saturday in conjunction with allowing for Sunday hunting is a positive step toward offering increased hunting opportunity for our members and fellow hunters. And most importantly, we believe the PA Game Commission is best suited to make these crucial wildlife management decisions.

The PFSC has many partners that we work with on critical policy issues impacting our PFSC members. They include some of the following –

- Sportsmen & Women Policy Workgroup
  - Safari Club International
  - National Deer Assoc.
  - Ruffed Grouse Society
  - Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
  - Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
  - Delta Waterfowl
  - Ducks Unlimited
  - Hunters for Sunday Hunting
  - Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen and Conservationists
  - Pheasants Forever
  - Izaak Walton League
  - American Sportfishing Assoc.
  - National Wild Turkey Federation
  - Trout Unlimited
  - Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

- PA Farm Bureau
- Hunter Nation
- PA Trapper's Association
- Others

I hate to have to read through this full list, but I think it's important. Because for many of these organizations, you could have inserted them to read from most of my testimony today in opposition to House Bill 70, legislation that proposes to mandate the opening day of the rifle deer season through law. We support the principles of scientific wildlife management and the PA Game Commission's authority to determine hunting rules and regulations based on the best available science.

### **RESTATEMENT OF OUR STANCE ON SATURDAY OPENER FOR 2025**

I attended and provided public comment at the PA Game Commission's January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025, board meeting, where they conducted their preliminary vote to approve the seasons and bag limits for the 2025 hunting seasons. The PA Game Commission voted to continue with the opening day of rifle deer season on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. I and other PFSC board members were in attendance to listen and speak on important policy issues, including in support of the PA Game Commission keeping the opening day of rifle deer season as Saturday and the next day – Sunday – as the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the 2025 rifle deer season. The combination of these two weekend days to open the rifle deer season resonates with our membership and what I believe to be the greater hunting community. But please note, the PA Game Commission reviews and votes upon hunting seasons and bag limits every year and the currently proposed Saturday opener for rifle deer season could be changed at any time.

Change is hard and not often readily accepted by Pennsylvanians who cherish their traditions. We acknowledge that not everyone was happy with the Saturday rifle deer season opener change in 2019. And there are still some vocal opponents. But that doesn't mean it wasn't necessary or good. We continue to hear stories from our members who are excited to hunt with their school and college-aged kids and some who, because of work priorities, are ecstatic to hunt on opening day, something they hadn't been able to do before the change.

### **BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUE**

Before jumping into the Saturday vs. Monday opener discussion, I believe it's important to discuss the history of our deer population in PA. Here are some highlights -

- Deer and other large game animals were everywhere in the Commonwealth when William Penn came to what is now Pennsylvania.
- Prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, commercial hunting and the clear-cutting of most of our forests led to the decimation of our deer herd.
- This helped to lead to the establishment of the PA Game Commission in 1895, with the mission to properly manage the birds and mammals and their habitats for current and future generations in the Commonwealth.
- In 1905 and 1906, game preserves were established in Northcentral PA and deer were imported from other states. The plan was for the deer to repopulate on these public lands and spread to non-public lands.
- With the combination of the regeneration of our forests and this effort to repopulate the deer herd, the deer numbers exploded in the northern tier of PA.
- It's important to note that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of our deer population was primarily in the northern half of PA. Most of the southern tier of PA had little to no deer until the

1960s. Over time, the migration of the deer population to all parts of PA has led to most of our 13 million residents having to deal with our deer population.

- For comparison purposes, the number of deer harvested (only buck) in 1916 was 1,722. By 1931, the statewide deer harvest total was close to 100,000. Today, automobile accidents alone lead to that total. And now, PA hunters harvest over 400,000 deer annually. It is estimated that we currently have 1.6 million deer in the Commonwealth.

Why is this history so important? I believe it's important to know where we have been. As well as where our wildlife management process has brought us. And to keep focused on where we need to go.

As mentioned, the PA Game Commission is responsible for properly managing the birds and mammals and their habitats for current and future generations in the Commonwealth. Based on recommendations from wildlife experts, the commissioners decide what seasons and bag limits will be put in place each year to control the wildlife populations and provide opportunities for hunters and trappers.

Recreational hunting is something that Pennsylvania hunters cherish and protect with passion. It's important to note that recreational hunting is the predominant method used by the PA Game Commission to manage wildlife populations today.

Since the establishment of the Game Commission, many changes have occurred over the years related to harvesting deer. Here's a good illustration – In 1983, 1 out of every 10 deer harvested occurred in archery season. Today, almost 4 out of every 10 deer harvested annually occurs in archery season. To emphasize this point, because the majority of our archery seasons fall before the opening day of rifle season, this impacts the number of deer in our woods and fields for the opening day of rifle deer season.

Managing our deer population brings a real balancing act that the Game Commission has to take on throughout the year, every year. Always reviewing the needs and methods for the following –

- Wildlife management
- Keeping an adequate number of hunters in PA – both from an economics perspective (license sales) and from using hunters to manage our wildlife populations
- Habitat and forest management
- Public health and safety (wildlife encounters, auto accidents with wildlife, etc.)
- Land use planning
- Ensuring an abundance of wildlife for a public food source
- Impacts to the community – PA's #1 industry – agriculture – and our farmers' concern with crop damage and impact on yield production; foresters want to see fewer deer, so desired tree saplings are not eaten to oblivion; hunters not only wanting to shoot a big buck but also wanting to see so many more deer when out hunting; land management concerns over local growth and development vs. creating more public lands. The competing interests are endless.

### **WHAT THE OTHER SIDE IS SAYING – RETURN TO THE MONDAY OPENER**

Here are some of the discussion points made by the Monday opener proponents that I've heard raised on this issue over the last four years –

- The Monday opener was in place for 60 years, and the Saturday opener is ruining our hunting tradition

- It's ruined the economy of our rural business community and fundraising opportunities for our volunteer fire companies and EMS units
- The hunters "overwhelmingly" want to go back to a Monday opener, with numerous studies to show this is the case
- It's driving license sales down and leading to less hunting
- Not having the weekend prior to the Monday opener to sight-in our guns, walk the woods to get acclimated with the surroundings, and check the stability of our tree stands leads to safety issues.

### **WHY WE DISAGREE AND SUPPORT THE PA GAME COMMISSION**

Fundamentally, the PFSC trusts the PA Game Commission to balance all the competing interests and decide what hunting seasons and bag limits should be put in place each year to control the deer population.

Otherwise, I just don't believe the arguments being made by the other side that going back to a Monday opener makes sense, given the currently available information that I've been able to find. Please see below for the information used to base my decision.

#### License Sales

- From 2013 to 2018, we lost 95,746 in licenses sold or a decrease of just over 10%.
- 2019 (first year of the Saturday opener) saw an increase of 5,245 licenses or 0.6%
- The next 4 years saw a relatively steady level of license sales, with back-and-forth annual increases and decreases. The net total over this period was a loss of 1,692. Details are shown below –
  - 2019 – increase of 5,245 or 0.6%
  - 2020 – increase of 26,853 or 3.2%
  - 2021 – decrease of 25,377 or -2.9%
  - 2022 – decrease of 13,138 or -1.5%
  - 2023 – increase of 4,725 or 0.5%
- Another note of caution in regard to future license sales comes from a July 2024 Center for Rural PA report. It shows that deaths have outpaced births in rural PA every year since 2008. In short, the pool to pull our future hunters from is continuing to shrink in PA.
- It was recently mentioned to me that hunting is not a "Gateway Activity". Meaning that it takes many steps for a first-time hunter to ever step foot into the woods or our fields to start hunting. These last two points highlight the need to be creative and proactive when recruiting future hunters and retaining current hunters in PA.

#### Economics

- The PA Office of Tourism report from February 2024 (covering 2017 through 2022) shows an almost entirely positive economic growth pattern in the recreational/tourism and retail sales segments of the economy across PA.
- FedEx and UPS revenue reports covering the period from 2019 through 2024 show a growth pattern, as well as an increased reliance on shoppers using the internet.
- I know business patterns change constantly across the Commonwealth, but to blame the change from a Monday opener to a Saturday opener just doesn't compute with my own personal observations in Bradford County.

In addition, my family and friends travel to our hunting camp on a regular/monthly basis and not just a day or two before the season opener. We frequent our local restaurants – Nana’s Country Kitchen, Original Italian Pizza & Ristorante and Oliver’s Pub; our hardware stores – Arey Building Supply and Tractor Supply; our gun/hunting supply shops – Rutt’Nbucks Outfitters and Fulmer’s Sporting Goods; at all times of the year. The continued statements from the Monday opener proponents that hunters cannot patronize such local businesses over the weekend and that this significantly impacts local businesses' annual revenues negatively is just not convincing.

### Hunting Overall

- The Monday opener proponents have said that “with only 9 hours of daylight between Thanksgiving dinner and being in the woods Saturday morning, necessary activities for a safe and successful hunt, such as time for travel, scouting, sighting in firearms, and more are severely rushed.” I might add that an additional item mentioned by a Monday opener proponent at the PA Game Commission’s January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025, board meeting mentioned that this lack of turnaround time leads to being unable to check the ratchet straps on a hunter’s tree stand. With all due respect to my hunting colleagues who use these statements to debate this topic, I find it absolutely scary. As with the prior economic impact statements, my family and friends frequent our hunting camp regularly. We sight in our various hunting rifles and archery equipment multiple times a year. We check and make improvements to our property and hunting blinds/stands way before the opening day of the season.
- I also believe that being better neighbors and members of the communities where we hunt will lead to more hunting opportunities moving forward.

### Tradition

Just stating the obvious, the PA Game Commission’s decision to move the rifle deer season to a Saturday does not preclude the Monday opener proponents from getting to camp and continuing their long-standing tradition of heading into the woods on Monday morning. However, statutorily moving the opener away from the Saturday following Thanksgiving would keep my family, friends and many other supporters of the Saturday opener from hunting deer on that day, thereby canceling out a tradition enjoyed by new and longstanding hunters alike.

Hunting traditions are important. They help to keep generations of hunters in the woods and will help to get future generations into the woods and fields. I’d like to relay a few of my personal traditions from the last 42 years of hunting –

- Starting at 12 years of age, I was fortunate to be able to hunt with my Great-Grandfather, Grandfather, Dad, Uncles and many cousins. We hunted on family lands. Unfortunately, family deaths and lack of resources to pay inheritance taxes led to us losing the land in Lebanon County and those early hunting “traditions.”
- But we’ve adapted and found other hunting opportunities – we’ve been fortunate to hunt on a family friend’s property in Tioga County during the second week of deer season for the last 20+ years. It’s been a great experience for my whole family, including the location where my oldest son shot his first deer.
- As mentioned earlier in my remarks, my family has been blessed to have purchased an old hunting cabin in 2017 in Bradford County. This experience has led to wonderful traditions for my wife, Dad, two sons, many friends and their children. I might add that the Saturday/Sunday weekend opener for rifle deer season single-handedly led both my youngest son and at least two of my friend's children to take up hunting and harvest deer within the last two years.

- All of this is to say that I've experienced meaningful change to longstanding generational hunting traditions in my 42 years of hunting. However, we've adapted, and my family and friends have all been able to create new, meaningful and long-lasting hunting traditions here in the Commonwealth.

### Hunter Consensus

- A vast majority of hunters have moved on and support the PA Game Commission's current decision on seasons and bag limits for 2025, which includes the opening day of the rifle deer season as Saturday and the next day – Sunday – as the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the rifle deer season.
- PFSC members from every region in the Commonwealth support allowing the PA Game Commission to have full regulatory authority over setting hunting seasons and bag limits for our wildlife.
  - Please see the attached PFSC letters on this subject.
- Responsive Management conducted a 2022 survey commissioned by the PA Game Commission – "PA Deer Hunters' Attitudes Regarding Opening Day of the Season". The study concluded that 60% of PA deer hunters strongly or moderately support having the opening day of rifle deer season on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, compared to 27% who strongly or moderately oppose it.
- Please see the attached Sportsmen & Women Policy Workgroup letter supporting the PA Game Commission's full regulatory authority over setting hunting seasons and bag limits (including the opening day of rifle deer season) for our wildlife.

### **CONCLUSION**

Since joining the PFSC four years ago to represent them in the state Capitol, I've attended all PA Game Commission quarterly board meetings. There have been a few of these quarterly meetings where 15-20 individuals would speak in support of returning to the Monday opener. However, I was very surprised when only six Monday opener advocates voiced their support at the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025, PA Game Commission meeting, where this very issue was voted upon.

It was at this meeting that I again mentioned that the beauty of the PA Game Commission having control over our hunting seasons and bag limits is that they can always make future changes if and when needed. And I concluded with my customary advisement on how difficult it is to get something changed in the state legislature, including even when there is a consensus need to want to do so.

I hope you take away from today's discussion that the Commonwealth has a passionate and diverse hunting landscape and community. We don't all agree with each other all the time. But we do agree on how important hunting and our wildlife are to our current and future generations. And I want to reiterate that I deeply care and respect my fellow hunting/trapping/fishing/conservation family members.

Thank you, Chair Kulik, Chair Maloney and Game & Fisheries Committee members for providing the PFSC with this opportunity to speak on this very important topic.

### **CITATIONS**

- PA Game Commission's Hunting Furtaker License and Permit Sales Report
- PA Office of Tourism Report – Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism in PA
- Statista 2025 – Revenue Reports for FedEx and UPS

- Keystone Research Center Report – How is PA Economy Performing at the County Level Compared to Before the Pandemic?
- Center for Rural PA – October 2023 Report – PA Population Projections 2050
- Center for Rural PA – July 2024 Report – PA’s Population is Declining Faster Than Expected
- PA Hunters Against the Saturday Deer Opener – Policy Pamphlet
- “Deer Wars” by Bob Frye