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Conserving, Enhancing and Protecting Michigan's Natural Resources and Outdoors Heritage since 1937.
MUCC

Tuesday, March 8, 2011

House Committee on Natural Resources, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation

Testimony of Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC)
Re: House Bill 4371 – "Hunter Heritage" Bill

Dear Chairman Foster and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity today to support House Bill 4371, which is a critical step in reversing Michigan's downward trend in hunter recruitment and retention.

As you all know, Michigan is a state with a rich outdoor tradition. Today, nearly two million sportsmen and women take to Michigan's woods and waters each year with friends and family to hunt, fish, trap and enjoy everything that Pure Michigan has to offer. In doing so, these sportsmen and women make up a significant portion of Michigan's tourism economy, spending roughly $3.4 billion directly in the state each year, which has an additional $5.9 billion economic ripple effect annually for the state and local economies. This spending also generates about $406 million in federal taxes and $378 million in state and local taxes each year. These sportsmen and women also pay for the lion's share of conservation in our state through license fees and federal excise taxes on sporting equipment. With a 17% reduction in hunters over 10 years, the entire state has an interest in keeping our hunting heritage – and spending – alive and well.

Sadly, however, reports point to Michigan as ranking last in the nation when it comes to the recruitment and retention of hunters. For every 100 hunters who leave the field, only 26 take their place, placing Michigan 43% below the national recruitment and retention average of 69%. For this reason, MUCC members in 2010 passed a resolution to advocate for the elimination of Michigan's minimum youth hunting age, which is considered a major barrier to bringing youth into the sport of hunting. MUCC members believe that parents, not the government, should be able to decide when their kids are mature enough to hunt under a specially designed mentored youth hunting program. Such a program would not only improve Michigan's last-in-the-nation hunter recruitment and retention rate, but also foster wholesome family-focused recreation. Additionally, the program would allow interested youth hunters to "give hunting a try" before the rigors of adolescence and extra-curricular activities fill up their schedules.

The "Hunter Heritage" Bill – Promoting hunting safety and ethics, preserving Michigan's outdoor heritage

Much to the surprise of many who are not familiar with hunting, the activity in itself is far safer than most types of recreation, with far lower injury rates per 100 participants than most other common youth activities such as football, basketball, running/jogging, soccer, baseball and gymnastics. In fact, youth hunters rank atop the safest hunters in the field when supervised by an adult, according to the peer reviewed Youth Hunting Report. The "Hunter Heritage" Bill is not only about preserving Michigan's hunting heritage; it's about further instilling safe and ethical hunting and conservation practices in our young people. Keeping these goals in mind, the bill will allow the Natural Resources Commission to design and implement a Mentored Youth Hunting Safety Program with the input of hunting safety experts and other stakeholder groups, including Michigan's Hunter Safety Program instructors. MUCC hopes that this legislation will allow Michigan to join the ranks of other states with lower hunting incident rates. Currently, hunting incident rates are 10 percent higher in the 19 states where a minimum age is set, most likely because youth who learn hunting safety when they are young carry safe hunting habits throughout their adult lives.

Sports Injuries

Rank	Sport/Activity	Injuries per 100 Participants
1	Football (Tackle)	18.8
2	Ice Hockey	15.9
3	Boxing	12.7
5	Soccer	9.3
6	Cheerleading	9.0
7	Basketball	7.6
10	Baseball	5.8
14	Football (Touch)	4.4
16	Volleyball	3.1
21	Tennis	2.5
24	Horseback Riding	1.8
25	Aerobics	1.7
28	Roller Hockey	1.3
29	Hunting	1.3
30	Mountain/Rock Climbing	1.2

Source: A Comprehensive Study of Sports Injuries in the U.S. (American Sports Data, Inc., 2002)

Firearm-Related Hunting Incidents, by Group

	Total Participantes (14,766,000)	
	Accidents % of Total Participants Involved	Fatalities % of Total Participants Involved
All Hunters	.000052	.000005
Youth Hunters	.000005	.0000008
Supervised Youth Hunters	.0000016	.0000002

Source: The Hunter Incident Clearinghouse, 2002—A project of the International Hunter Education Association, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Wildlife Restoration Act, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, NWTF, and Silentip Productions, Ltd.

Data from the "Families Afield" Coalition

Improve hunter recruitment and hunter safety in Michigan by allowing parents, not the government, to determine when their child is mature enough to learn about hunting and hunting safety

As mentioned before, this legislation is also aimed at reducing arbitrary barriers that are preventing families from participating in Michigan's great tradition of hunting. Currently 20 states permit a mentor to introduce hunting to a youth before the youth hunter must complete a hunter education course. Those state's hunter recruitment statistics are 25 percent higher than states with a minimum hunting age. Additionally, new research from the Youth Hunting Report shows that state laws and regulations that restrict youth hunters greatly hamper hunter recruitment efforts. The study, which states that 80 percent of hunters attribute their hunting tradition to experiences occurring when they were young,

also found that adults are leaving the field as some parents chose to forgo hunting rather than leave their child, who is under the state's minimum hunting age, out of the hunting experience. With the passage of the "Hunter Heritage" Bill, Michigan will appropriately join 31 other states that promote parent-child hunting rather than setting arbitrary, preventative age barriers.

Lagging behind – Where Michigan ranks among Midwestern states

The "Hunter Heritage" legislation is modeled after Pennsylvania's Youth Hunting Safety Program (see attached sheet), which was signed into law in 2005 and has worked exceptionally well since. In Pennsylvania's first year with the program in 2006, 43,780 youth were mentored by 32,913 adults. Popularity of the program further increased in popularity in 2007 with 58,883 mentored youth hunters who were mentored by 51,141 adults. In 2008-2009, Pennsylvania's hunter recruitment/retention ratio also benefited with a 21,437 spike in general hunting license sales.

Other states besides Pennsylvania have taken action as well:

- In 2006, Ohio passed legislation establishing an apprentice hunting license that allows youth to hunt with family members - Ohio does not have a minimum youth hunting age
- In 2005, Minnesota passed legislation allowing youth under 12 to hunt wild turkey with their parents
- Indiana, Illinois and Iowa do not have a minimum hunting age - all three are in the top 14 states for hunter recruitment and retention

Additional benefits of the "Hunter Heritage" Bill

With all of the reasons listed above to pass House Bill 4371, there are also some laudable "indirect" benefits from promoting this legislation. Youth hunters who are taught about hunting safety and ethics at a young age also learn valuable life lessons like respect and appreciation for nature, respect for others, patience, self-control and responsibility. Additionally, keeping a healthy hunting population is also important for controlling high deer population levels, which can positively help farmers by reducing crop damage. Balancing the deer population at a healthy level is also important for reducing deer/automobile collisions, which can play a factor in reducing auto insurance rates.

As you can see, there are many reasons why Michigan should act to foster the future of our great outdoor traditions through this legislation. On behalf of over 42,000 members and 250 affiliated clubs of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, I ask for your support of House Bill 4371 – Michigan's "Hunter Heritage" Bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Dave Nyberg
Legislative Affairs Manager