

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

In Opposition to L.D. 275

An Act to Change the Bag Limits on Wild Turkey

SPONSORED BY: Senator MIRAMANT of Knox.

Cosponsored by Representative EVANGELOS of Friendship and

Senators: BELLOWS of Kennebec, CYRWAY of Kennebec, President JACKSON of Aroostook, Representatives: BERRY of Bowdoinham, LANDRY of Farmington, MASTRACCIO of Sanford, PLUECKER of Warren, RISEMAN of Harrison.

DATE OF HEARING: February 13, 2019.

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative Nadeau and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Jim Connolly, Resource Management Director representing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking in opposition to **L.D. 275**.

This bill requires the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to double the bag limits on wild turkey. It also requires the Commissioner to submit a report by January 1, 2020, and annually thereafter, that includes recommendations regarding bag limits on wild turkey. It gives the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee authority to report out a bill based on the report. This bill as written, reverts authority over wild turkeys to the Legislature and requires the Department to submit an annual report to the Legislature. The Legislature can report out a bill based on that report.

The authority for the Commissioner to have the current fall season was first established during the fall of 2016. This law removed the two-bird bag limit on wild turkeys over the spring and fall seasons and allowed the Commissioner to establish by rule varying bag limits by WMD for the 2018 seasons. These recently enacted rules have already resulted in increased harvests by hunters. The Department has also recently completed a Big Game Planning process that included wild turkeys. As part of that work, the Department is conducting research on turkeys, including their reproductive success and survival. The ability to track hunter effort using turkey permits and harvest through direct electronic tagging are important parts of the Department's overall turkey management program and are now in place. This data will be even more important as we work to more intensively manage the turkey population and increase harvest and participation. The other factor to consider, is that turkey populations can vary greatly from year to year based on the hatching success of broods in the spring and the survival of all turkeys from predation and the effects of weather the rest of the year. The Big Game Planning work did point to the fall season as a place where the Department could increase participation and harvest.

Given that, this bill does look to increase the harvest at a time of the year when hens are taken and the season structure and the harvest can be used to control the turkey population. However, after reviewing the proposal, the Department is concerned that this proposal doubles the bag limit without a connection to the relevant turkey population or biological data for that area.

Based on that we ask that the bill not be acted upon until the end of the session to allow the Department time to propose, in rule a more comprehensive reform of the fall turkey season that would:

1. Allow for increased bag limits in the fall for those areas of the state that can sustain a higher harvest. Currently we are evaluating a 5-turkey bag limit for southern WMDs. However, northern WMDs where the turkey population is much lower could be impacted by a bag limit set that high. Managing bag limits by WMD allows for more predictable participation by hunters and a more predictable harvest.
2. Extend the turkey hunting season earlier into September at a time when the weather is better and more hunters might participate. Turkey harvest records from this past fall show the first week of November makes up less than seven percent of the total fall harvest. We would expect the harvest to remain low as the deer season progresses. The start of the firearms season on deer seems to change hunters focus to deer hunting.
3. We would also work to maintain current requirements for hunter orange while turkey hunting during the firearm season on deer. We are strongly encouraging simplification of our hunting laws and would like the opportunity to implement the Big Game Plan suggestions within our Department rules and continue our research to better document turkey population dynamics in Maine. Currently, many states around us are cutting back on turkey hunting opportunity. The Department would like to ensure that we maintain a healthy turkey population in Maine while addressing nuisance issues and expanding opportunity. This would keep our authority consistent with other big game species when managing turkey bag limits, seasons and methods, within rule.

Again, we would reiterate our appreciation for the sponsors in looking to increase opportunity for turkey hunting. The Department is confident that we can work with the interested parties to establish a sound framework for an expanded fall turkey season that will meet the interest in increased turkey hunting opportunities for all.

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