

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

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

NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST L.D. 33

“An Act To Establish a Thanksgiving Youth Turkey Hunting Season”

SPONSORED BY: Representative TUELL of East Machias.

Cosponsored by Senator MOORE of Washington and

Representatives: CAMPBELL of Orrington, HANINGTON of Lincoln, KINNEY of Knox,
NADEAU of Winslow, SKOLFIELD of Weld, STEARNS of Guilford.

DATE OF HEARING: January 30, 2019

Good afternoon Senator Dill, Representative Nadeau and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Kelsey Sullivan the Game Bird Biologist representing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, neither for nor against **L.D. 33**.

This bill directs the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to establish a special youth hunting season from the Monday prior to Thanksgiving Day to the Saturday following Thanksgiving Day during which youth hunters with a valid junior hunting license may harvest one wild turkey.

The Department is supportive of efforts that would increase participation in turkey hunting as well as the harvest of wild turkeys. The Department has 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 tagging are important parts of the Department's overall turkey management program. These 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 the proposed break in the season, the lateness of the proposed week, the weather at that time of the year, competition from deer hunting, and limiting the hunt to youth, will all work against the hunt being a successful management tool.

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. Position the fall youth turkey hunt day on the Saturday before the opening of the fall turkey season when the weather is nicer and turkey hunting would be more prominent. A September youth day would not interfere with many family's tradition of deer hunting together during Thanksgiving week.
4. 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 especially by Youth hunters. 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 additional youth day opportunity as well as provide increased turkey hunting opportunities for all.

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