

November 7, 2024

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
284 State Street
41 SHS
Augusta, ME 04333-0041

Dear Commissioner and Members of the Department,

As the Forest Conservation Director for the Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society, I am writing to express the perspectives and concerns of our members regarding potential modifications to the grouse hunting season aimed at addressing user conflicts with moose hunting. Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society comprises a diverse group of members, including dedicated hunters who are committed to the conservation and sustainable use of wildlife resources. Our organization supports balanced and scientifically informed approaches to wildlife management that uphold fair access for all stakeholders and maintain ecological and recreational benefits.

Concerns Over Proposed Grouse Season Changes

Our members are strongly opposed to modifying the established grouse season dates solely to reduce conflicts with moose hunting. Grouse hunting is a deeply valued activity, integral to Maine's outdoor heritage, and has significant cultural and economic importance. Adjusting the season would disproportionately impact grouse hunters by limiting their opportunities during an already short season, particularly in a manner that favors only one user group. Notably, the current season structure, as outlined in the 2024 report from the Stakeholder Group to the IFW Legislative Committee, was found to be a contentious topic without full consensus.

The suggestion to adjust the grouse hunting season, such as starting later than the last Saturday of September, risks alienating a significant segment of Maine's hunting community. While moose hunting is an iconic and economically beneficial pursuit, it is critical that management decisions do not unintentionally marginalize other users or restrict access to cherished outdoor activities. Our chapter leaders have pointed out that the first week of Moose Hunting is Bull Only for the following zones 1-6, 10, 11, 18, 19, 27, 28. While some part of the state overlaps with Moose hunting, the other of the ½ of the state doesn't even have a Moose Hunting season. The revenue impact for lodges, guides and the small business owners of these towns would be drastic. Additionally, the loss of not being able to book people for the cast and blast the following week of the Saturday opener could be an estimated loss to a lodge owner of up to \$64K for 4 days with this law change

Science-Based Approach to Mitigating Conflicts

We advocate for science-backed strategies to address user conflicts without sacrificing the experience of grouse hunters. The comprehensive recommendations from the 2024 stakeholder report emphasize the need for data-driven approaches, such as:

1. **Educational Initiatives:** Enhancing hunter education programs for moose permit holders to foster better behavior, reduce road congestion, and promote respect for shared spaces. This aligns with the Department's recommendation to develop a supplemental hunter course (Report Back and Recommendations for Strategy to Reduce User Conflicts During Moose Hunting Seasons, 2024).
2. **Targeted Surveys:** Employing surveys to gauge the extent and nature of conflicts experienced by hunters, landowners, and ecotourism participants to inform policy decisions (Report Back and Recommendations for Strategy to Reduce User Conflicts During Moose Hunting Seasons, 2024). This data can guide nuanced adjustments that address the root of conflicts without disproportionately impacting grouse hunters.

Alternative Solutions

We recommend prioritizing actions that do not disrupt the current grouse season framework:

- **Hunter Education and Distribution:** Promote educational initiatives encouraging moose hunters to venture further from roads, which could help distribute activity and reduce congestion.
- **Coordination with Landowners:** Work closely with private landowners to manage access and mitigate potential damages or disruptions during the hunting season.
- **Pilot Programs:** Before enacting broad changes, consider implementing pilot programs that test adjustments in select Wildlife Management Districts (WMDs) to assess outcomes and impacts on different user groups.

Commitment to Collaborative Solutions

The Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society stands ready to collaborate with the Department and other stakeholders to develop balanced, science-based solutions that accommodate all outdoor enthusiasts equitably. We understand the challenges associated with managing a shared and finite resource and believe that inclusive decision-making, backed by data, will ultimately support Maine's wildlife heritage and recreational opportunities.

Thank you for considering our comments. We trust the Department will weigh these perspectives carefully and uphold the principles of fair and evidence-based management. We welcome any opportunity to engage further in this discussion and contribute to strategies that support both moose and grouse hunting communities.

Respectfully,

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