

Modernizing Hunting Laws

Public input and MassWildlife recommendations

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) is responsible for the conservation of freshwater fish and wildlife. Legal hunting is a safe, regulated tool for:

- Managing healthy wildlife populations
- Providing funding for wildlife conservation
- Connecting people with nature
- Providing food for families across Massachusetts



Without adequate hunting access, wildlife populations can grow beyond what the habitat can support, leading to forest degradation, biodiversity loss, human-wildlife conflicts, agricultural damage, vehicle collisions, and increased risk of tick-borne diseases.

Public Engagement

At the request of the Healey-Driscoll Administration, MassWildlife gathered public feedback on hunting statutes in January–February 2026.

5

**Listening
Sessions**

946

**Session
Attendees**

11,396

**Total
Comments**

7 out of 10 people support modernizing hunting laws



Remove statutory ban on Sunday hunting

11,077 comments, 70% support, 30% oppose

Remove statutory ban on crossbow hunting

9,776 comments, 71% support, 29% oppose

Reduce hunting setbacks

10,466 comments, 66% support, 34% oppose

Statutory Recommendations

Remove ban on Sunday hunting

Massachusetts is currently one of only two states with an outright ban on Sunday hunting. There is no wildlife management reason to maintain a ban on Sunday hunting.

- Enable MassWildlife to regulate Sunday hunting
- Provide greater flexibility for wildlife management
- Improve opportunity for working families
- Increase fair, equitable access to outdoor recreation
- Reduce agricultural wildlife damage
- Create potential for more harvest and food

If the statute was repealed, MassWildlife would use the best available science to determine when and under what conditions Sunday hunting may be permitted through the public regulatory process. The most popular hunting seasons are for deer. Most deer hunting happens in the early morning of fall and winter when fewer other people are outdoors. Under existing season frameworks, up to 21 additional Sundays of deer hunting could be added on the Islands and 14 on the mainland (10 Sundays for turkey, 14 for bear). Nearly all states allow Sunday hunting without compromising public safety.

Remove ban on hunting with a crossbow

Crossbows are safe, ethical hunting implements but are currently only allowed for hunters with a permanent disability. Massachusetts has the most restrictive crossbow laws in the Northeast. Over 16,000 hunters in Massachusetts already use a crossbow to hunt.

- Enable MassWildlife to regulate crossbow hunting
- Improve accessibility and fairness
- Reduce costly and time-consuming barriers for hunters
- Increase harvest where firearms are restricted

If the statute was repealed, MassWildlife would use the best available science to determine for which hunting seasons and species crossbows could be used through the public regulatory process. Evidence from multiple other states has shown that allowing all hunters to use crossbows can lead to a significant increase in deer harvest, particularly in suburban areas that don't allow the discharge of firearms and where additional harvest is most needed.

Reduce setbacks for bowhunting and falconry

Hunting is currently prohibited within 500 feet of a dwelling except with permission.

- Reduce bowhunting setback to 250 feet from a dwelling, except with permission
- Remove setback for falconry (the practice of using a trained bird of prey to hunt)
- No recommended change to firearm setback or hunting setback from roads
- Provide alignment with other states and maintain high safety standard
- Open more land to hunting, especially where wildlife is overabundant

Applying the same setback of 500 feet for hunters using firearms and archery equipment does not recognize the substantial differences in effective range and how these hunting implements function. Having large setbacks limits the amount of land open to hunting, especially in eastern Massachusetts where open space is limited and deer populations are high. While there may be additional wildlife management benefit of reducing the bowhunting setback more, MassWildlife's recommendation of 250 feet recognizes the need to balance management benefit with public concerns about safety, privacy, and allowing hunting closer to homes. MassWildlife's recommendation still allows landowners to grant permission for hunting within the 250-foot setback, as is done now. Additionally, the setback for falconry should be removed, since it is a highly regulated hunting method that poses no projectile-related safety risk.

Support for Updating Laws

Across all three issues, there was broad public support for updating hunting laws to better meet current wildlife management goals. Thousands of commenters voiced support for many different reasons. Farmers described crop damage and livestock losses, hunters emphasized the importance of access to help feed their families, and environmental organizations called for action to protect forests stressed by overabundant deer. These recommendations reflect a shared recognition of the important role regulated hunting plays in meeting today's wildlife management challenges. These recommended changes will:

- Remove outdated and unnecessary barriers to hunting access
- Improve opportunity and fairness
- Allow hunters more time to enjoy nature and feed their families
- Reduce human-wildlife conflict issues
- Provide relief to farmers and landscaping businesses experiencing damage
- Address public health concerns by working to reduce deer densities and make alternate tick strategies more effective

Addressing Concerns

People who commented against updating hunting laws were primarily concerned with safety and perceived conflicts with other forms of outdoor recreation. Hunting in Massachusetts has a strong safety record and has long coexisted with other recreation.

Hunting safety

- Hunting is a highly regulated, safe activity and all hunters must be properly licensed.
- Hunting laws are strictly enforced by the Massachusetts Environmental Police.
- All first-time hunters are required to complete a Hunter Education course. The 12–16 hour curriculum focuses on safe handling and storage of hunting arms and ammunition, hunting laws and ethics, care and handling of wildlife, and conservation.
- Massachusetts hunters using firearms are required to complete approved training and possess a gun license issued by their municipal police department.

Hunting and other outdoor recreation

- While hunting accidents are extremely rare, any injury is one too many. Most hunting injuries are caused by falls from a tree stand and rarely involve non-hunters.
- There has never been a non-hunter killed by hunting in Massachusetts.
- Hunting typically occurs in the early morning hours in the fall and winter when fewer other people are outdoors.
- Over the years, MassWildlife has expanded hunting seasons in response to growing wildlife populations, but this has not resulted in a decline in public safety.
- While not supported by incident data, perceptions of safety can influence how people use outdoor spaces. Clear communication about seasons and methods, use of blaze orange, and predictable regulations help reduce user conflict and support safe, shared use of natural areas. There remain many public and private lands where hunting is not permitted for those who prefer to recreate in non-hunting areas.

Next Steps

MassWildlife's recommendations were developed in consultation with the Environmental Police with thoughtful consideration of public input and an evaluation of anticipated impacts to wildlife and recreation. These recommended statutory changes will enable MassWildlife to use scientific management to more effectively fulfill its mandate to manage wildlife populations, conserve biodiversity, improve access to outdoor recreation, address agricultural damage, and reduce human-wildlife conflicts.



Scan this code to read MassWildlife's white paper entitled "Modernizing Hunting Laws." This recommendation includes an in-depth analysis of public comments, an evaluation of anticipated impacts to wildlife and recreation, regional comparisons, and suggested redline of statutory amendments.