

# Updating Hunting Laws



*MassWildlife's recommendations on Sunday hunting, hunting with a crossbow, and hunting setbacks*



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*This recommendation was prepared by MassWildlife upon request of the Healey-Driscoll Administration (March 2026).*

## Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) is responsible for the conservation of all freshwater fish and wildlife in the Commonwealth, including rare plants and animals. As part of its mission, MassWildlife sets science-based regulations for hunting to conserve wildlife populations for all to enjoy, now and into the future. Regulated hunting is an important tool for managing wildlife populations, providing critical funding for the conservation of all wildlife and their habitats, connecting people with nature, and providing food for tens of thousands of families across Massachusetts. Without adequate hunting access, there can be negative consequences of overabundant wildlife, including forest degradation and biodiversity loss, human-wildlife conflict, agricultural damage, vehicle collisions, and greater risks of spread for wildlife- and human-diseases, such as tick-borne illnesses.

Upon request from the Healey-Driscoll Administration, MassWildlife held five listening sessions in January and February of 2026 to gather public feedback on statutes related to Sunday hunting, hunting with a crossbow, and setback distances for hunting. These topics generated significant public interest, with nearly 1,000 people attending the sessions and over 11,300 comments received through the sessions, an online form, letters, and emails. While a variety of perspectives were shared, most comments were in favor of removing the ban on Sunday hunting (70%), removing the ban on hunting with crossbows (71%), and reducing the hunting setback distance (66%). Those in favor expressed the need to modernize hunting laws to better meet current wildlife management goals and align with other states, improve hunting opportunities for working families, provide equitable access to hunting, and reduce human-wildlife conflicts. Those opposed primarily shared concerns about safety and conflicts with other forms of outdoor recreation.

With consideration of public feedback and an evaluation of anticipated impacts to wildlife management and outdoor recreation, MassWildlife offers the following recommendations, as endorsed by the Fisheries and Wildlife Board:

### **Remove the statutory ban to enable MassWildlife to regulate hunting on Sundays during established hunting seasons.**

Currently, Massachusetts is only one of two states with an outright ban on Sunday hunting and regulated hunting is the only outdoor recreation activity that is prohibited on Sundays. MassWildlife recommends removing the prohibition to hunt on Sundays, which will promote fair, equitable access to outdoor recreation and is supported by strong public safety data and decades of shared land use experience. The recent listening sessions show that most people support removing the Sunday hunting ban. Allowing Sunday hunting

would provide MassWildlife with science-based flexibility to better manage wildlife populations, conserve biodiversity, and address agricultural damage from wildlife.

**Remove the statutory prohibition to enable MassWildlife to regulate hunting with a crossbow during established hunting seasons.**

Currently, crossbows are prohibited for hunting except for hunters with a permanent disability which prevents them from using a conventional bow and arrow. Following recent changes to the laws in NY, NH, RI, and CT, Massachusetts has the most restrictive crossbow hunting laws in the Northeast. Modern archery equipment, including crossbows, are safe, effective, and ethical hunting implements. Allowing MassWildlife to regulate the use of crossbows will help the agency reach its wildlife management goals and provide more equitable hunting opportunities for all.

**Reduce the minimum archery hunting setback distance from 500 feet to 250 feet from a dwelling in use except with landowner permission and eliminate the hunting setback for falconry.**

Currently, Massachusetts prohibits hunting within 500 feet of a dwelling except with permission and prohibits hunting within 150 feet of a road. Other states in the Northeast, including densely populated states like NJ, RI, and CT, have less restrictive setbacks for bowhunting. Applying the same setback distance to archery equipment as firearms does not recognize the functional difference between these implements and their effective range. Reducing the bowhunting setback to 250 feet could open thousands of acres of land to hunting which is especially important in areas where wildlife populations are exceeding management goals. Additionally, MassWildlife recommends removing the setback for falconry, as hunting with a trained bird of prey does not involve any projectile or public safety risk. These setback changes would provide additional tools for wildlife management, maintain a high safety standard, and balance landowner concerns. MassWildlife recommends maintaining the existing discharge setback of 150 feet from roads and maintaining the setback of 500 feet from a dwelling in use for hunting with all other legal hunting implements except with landowner permission.

MassWildlife recommends these statutory changes to enable the agency to use scientific management techniques to more effectively fulfill its mandate to manage wildlife populations, conserve biodiversity, improve outdoor-recreation opportunities, address agricultural damage, and reduce human-wildlife conflicts. Adopting these recommended legislative changes will complement MassWildlife's ongoing efforts to expand hunting opportunity and access through regulations, education, and land conservation.

Massachusetts continues to maintain a strong hunting safety record, demonstrating that prudent increases in hunting opportunity can be implemented responsibly. MassWildlife

consulted with the Massachusetts Environmental Police on these recommendations to provide input on enforcement, safety, and implementation considerations. If these hunting statutes were changed, MassWildlife would consider public input and use the best available science to determine how to implement changes through the regulatory process.

## Public Feedback Summary

MassWildlife regularly employs public-comment periods as part of a structured, scientific data collection process to inform management and regulatory decisions. These public engagement and participation processes actively solicit input in a variety of forms, providing MassWildlife with the ability to enumerate the values, interests, and positions among individuals and groups. Upon a request from the Healey-Driscoll Administration to collect public feedback on the hunting laws, MassWildlife held five listening sessions and created an online comment form that was open for four weeks (Table 1).

Table 1. Dates, venues, number of participants, and number of comments received, January 9–February 6, 2026.

Date	Format	Participants	Comments
January 27	Zoom	523	82
January 28	MassWildlife Headquarters, Westborough	69	34
January 29	Berkshire Community College, Pittsfield	97	52
February 2	Mass, Maritime Academy, Bourne	61	51
February 3	Zoom	196	55
Jan. 9–Feb. 6	Online form, letters, and emails	N/A	11,122
<b>Jan. 9–Feb 6</b>	<b>All formats</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>11,396</b>

These hunting laws generated significant public interest statewide, with thousands of comments received. A total of 11,231 unique comments were received (11,132 from individuals and 99 from organizations). Not accounting for duplicates received in multiple formats, 274 total oral comments were received during the listening sessions, and 11,122 written comments were received via the online form, emails, and letters. Overall position was quantified for those who clearly expressed a position of support or opposition (Table 2). In addition to support and opposition, an important component of the analysis was aggregating sentiments or themes related to the position expressed ([Appendix A](#)). Sentiment analysis tools, validated by staff, were used to categorize the major themes and ideas shared by the public. Some respondents submitted using multiple formats and some respondents did not comment on all three issues; duplicate comments submitted in multiple formats that could be identified were only counted once in the sentiment summary.

Table 2. Summary of comments received with clear positions of support or opposition.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Number of Comments</b>	<b>Support</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
Removing ban on Sunday hunting	11,077	70%	30%
Removing ban on hunting with crossbows	9,776	71%	29%
Reducing hunting setbacks	10,466	66%	34%

### **Sunday hunting**

A total of 11,177 comments were received related to Sunday hunting. Of those who expressed a clear opinion (11,077), most comments expressed support for changing the statute to allow Sunday hunting, while fewer said they wanted the statute to continue to prohibit Sunday hunting. Those in support of allowing Sunday hunting mentioned the importance of having an additional weekend day to hunt given competing work, school, and family obligations, the importance of recruiting and retaining hunters, the need for modernizing hunting laws, the management of deer populations, or aligning Massachusetts laws with neighboring states. A small minority of those in support of allowing Sunday hunting (less than 1%) mentioned a specific provision related to their support, including limiting Sunday hunting to certain hunting implements, land types, species, or time of day. Those opposed to Sunday hunting mentioned a desire to have one day a week without hunting, safety concerns related to non-hunters, conflicts with other recreational users, safety concerns related to pets, and noise pollution.

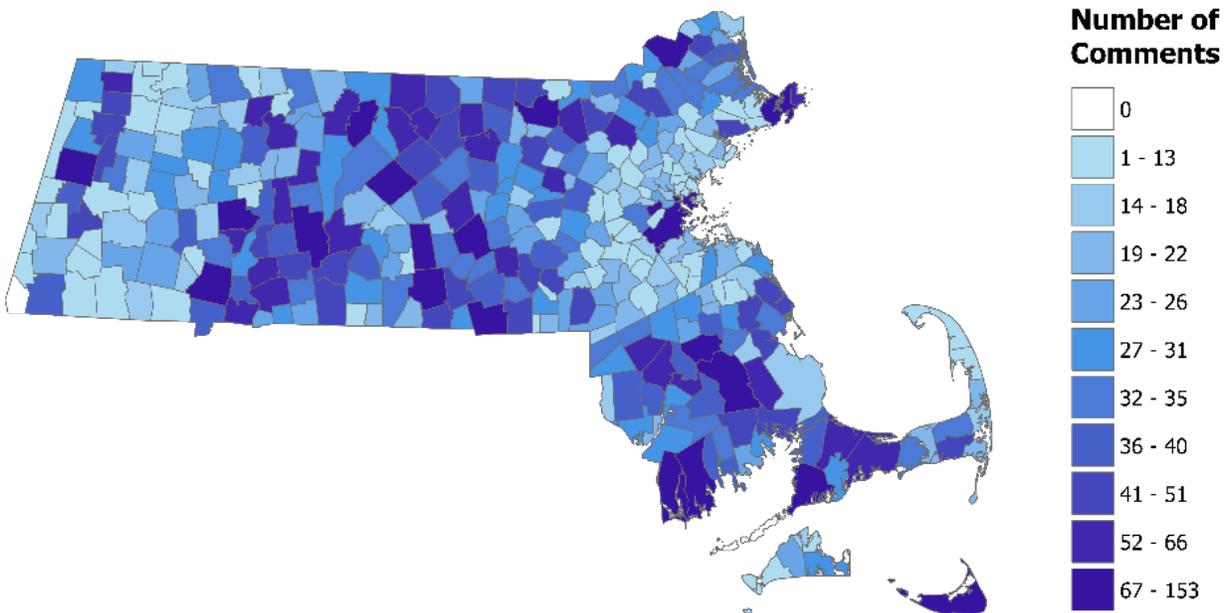
### **Hunting with a crossbow**

A total of 10,330 comments were received related to hunting with a crossbow. Of those who expressed a clear opinion (9,776), most comments expressed support for changing the statute to allow hunting with a crossbow for all licensed hunters, while fewer said they wanted the current law to stay in place. Those in support of allowing hunting with a crossbow mentioned the accuracy of crossbows, the benefits to some hunters who are not physically capable of pulling back a conventional or compound bow (including hunters with physical limitations or temporary injuries), the ease of use for those starting hunting, expanding hunting opportunities for young and new hunters, or retaining older hunters. A minority of those in support of allowing hunting with a crossbow (3%) mentioned a specific provision related to their support, including when and for whom crossbows should be allowed such as during a dedicated season, during the firearms season, for seniors, or for hunters with a temporary injury. Those opposed to changing the crossbow statute mentioned the desire to continue limiting crossbow use to disabled hunters, the lack of challenge of hunting with a crossbow, safety concerns, ethical and animal welfare concerns, or crossbows were not a primitive or traditional archery implement.

## Discharge setbacks for hunting

A total of 10,873 comments were received related to minimum setbacks for hunting. Of those who expressed a clear opinion (10,466), most comments expressed support for changing the statute to reduce the distance, while fewer said they wanted the current distances to stay in place. Those in support of reducing the hunting setback mentioned opportunities for archery hunting, greater access to land, the limited range of archery equipment compared to firearms, improved hunting access to urban/suburban areas for deer management, hunting as a safe activity, and the need to modernize outdated laws. Because MassWildlife did not provide a specific proposal on hunting setbacks for people to comment on, those generally in support of reducing setbacks offered feedback on different aspects of the current law by specifying which implements the setbacks should be reduced for (with archery being the top implement mentioned) and the distance the setback should be set to, and expressing support for reducing the setback from roads as well as from buildings. Those opposed to changing the minimum hunting setback distances mentioned general safety concerns, keeping the 500-foot setback, general fear or anxiety, concerns specific to firearms, or pet safety.

Figure 1. Statewide distribution of comments received by town, from white (no comments) through ten progressively darker shades of blue as the number of comments received increases.



Typically, comments received in listening sessions and online forms reflect the attitudes and opinions of the most engaged stakeholders. This includes stakeholders who closely follow and participate in agency decision-making processes and are notified through

membership networks, and those who generally have more time to respond.<sup>1</sup> That being said, this listening session process generated over 11,200 unique comments, a number an order of magnitude higher than typically received by MassWildlife in public hearings or listening sessions. MassWildlife received comments from nearly every town across the Commonwealth, and a variety of opinions were collected (Figure 1).

To gather as many perspectives as possible, MassWildlife widely advertised the opportunity to provide public feedback through a press release, newsletters, social media posts, emails, media interviews, and targeted outreach to interested stakeholder groups including sporting organizations, owners of conserved lands, environmental NGOs, farmers, and tribes. As with all public hearings and listening sessions, MassWildlife used a variety of techniques to promote the opportunity to provide public input on these laws.

- MassWildlife shared an announcement about the listening sessions in its January newsletter, which was distributed to over 295,000 subscribers. This list includes interested individuals, NGOs, land trusts, conservation commissions, press, animal control officers, municipalities, volunteers, and license holders. It was also shared in MassWildlife’s annual license renewal reminder email to over 300,000 licensed anglers and hunters. All listening sessions were also posted on MassWildlife’s calendar of events and interpretive services were offered for other spoken languages and ASL.
- MassWildlife issued the announcement as a press release, which was distributed to 1,182 members of the media. This topic generated broad public interest statewide, with staff participating in interviews and several media outlets covering the listening sessions, including the Berkshire Eagle, Greenfield Recorder, Boston Herald, Vineyard Gazette, Daily Hampshire Gazette, CAI The Point, Athol Daily News, Inquirer and Mirror, and Spectrum News.
- MassWildlife promoted the sessions on social media, including MassWildlife’s Facebook, which has over 83,000 followers, and Instagram, which has over 36,800 followers. Because these posts were widely shared, the announcements reached well beyond just direct followers. For example, the first announcement about the sessions on January 9 was viewed on Facebook over 725,000 times and a second reminder on January 26 was viewed over 178,000 times.
- The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Environmental Justice Coordinator shared the listening session announcement with tribal nations and the DFG Director of Legislative Affairs shared the announcement with legislators. The announcement

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<sup>1</sup> Lauber, T. Bruce, Decker, Daniel J., Leong, Kristen M., and Chase, Lisa C. “Stakeholder Engagement in Wildlife Management”. In Decker, Daniel J., Riley, Shawn J., and Siemer, William F. (Eds.), *Human Dimensions of Wildlife Management*, Second Edition (2012): 139–156.

was also included in EEA’s Office of Environmental Justice and Equity’s newsletter to over 1,600 stakeholders.

### **Support for changing hunting laws**

The majority of comments received expressed general support for hunting, which is consistent with independently conducted public opinion research. Recent national research shows that a large majority of American adults (73%) approve of hunting, a level of support that has remained relatively stable over time, averaging about 76% across 12 national studies conducted between 1995 and 2025.<sup>2</sup> While approval rates tend to be highest in the Midwest and Mountain West regions, national research shows that a majority (67%) of adults living in the Northeast also approve of hunting. These findings are consistent with a 2022 Massachusetts public attitudes survey, which found that most Massachusetts residents statewide (64%) approve of legal hunting, with approval rates varying by region and reaching as high as 78% in Western Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> National research has consistently demonstrated strong public support for hunting, particularly when hunting motivations align with broadly shared values like food provision, wildlife conservation, and personal and property protection. A majority of the public also supports recreational reasons for hunting, including spending time in nature with family and friends. In terms of specific methods and species, public support is strongest for archery equipment and deer hunting compared to other types of hunting, however most people also support legal hunting with firearms.<sup>4</sup>

*“Wild game is a major part of me and my wife’s yearly diet and is integral to our health. We take pride in being able to live a subsistence lifestyle. Wild game has given us such great nutrition over the years and we have noticed the benefits to our personal health as well compared to store bought meats.”*  
— **Worcester resident**

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<sup>2</sup> Responsive Management. *Americans’ Attitudes Towards Hunting and Recreational Shooting*. (2025).

<sup>3</sup> Responsive Management. *Massachusetts Public Attitudes Survey Towards Wildlife Conservation and Outdoor Recreation*. (2022).

<sup>4</sup> See note 2 above.

## **Hunting for Food**

Hunting to obtain food is widely approved of by the general public,<sup>2</sup> and is consistently one of the top motivations expressed by hunters in both national and state surveys.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> The importance of food sustenance, food sovereignty, and food insecurity was underscored in public comments, particularly by those in support of hunting on Sunday and expanded use of crossbows. Hunting feeds tens of

thousands of hunters and their communities in Massachusetts every year, including through

[MassWildlife's Hunters Share the Harvest program](#), which has donated over 100,000 meals of venison to families facing food insecurity to date since its launch in 2022. Providing more hunting opportunity supports the efforts of the Healey-Driscoll Administration's Anti-Hunger Task Force by giving residents more access to an organic, sustainable source of protein, and by helping local farms better manage wildlife damage.



When there are too many deer on the landscape, they eat many tree saplings and seedlings. This degrades forest health and negatively impacts many other kinds of wildlife and plants.

Nationally, wild-harvested game donation programs like Hunters Share the Harvest provide more than 10 million meals each year at a value of \$13.1 million.<sup>9</sup>

## **Hunting as a wildlife and habitat conservation tool**

Regulated hunting is an important conservation tool that helps manage wildlife populations and funds the conservation of all wildlife species and their habitats. For many species, such as white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and black bear, regulated hunting allows the public access to the resource while serving as the primary means through which

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<sup>5</sup> Responsive Management. *Exploring Recent Increases in Hunting and Fishing Participation*. (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Pinckney, H.P., Sene-Harper, A, Wynveen, C J., Holsman, R.H. and Dunfee, M. *Black Hunters: Reclaiming the Tradition* (Cabot, VT: Wildlife Management Institute, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Responsive Management. *Exploring the R3 Needs and Opportunities of Female Hunters, Sport Shooters and Archers*. (2022).

<sup>8</sup> MassWildlife. Learn to Hunt program participant surveys (2022–2025).

<sup>9</sup> Mason, D. S., Bell, M. E., Kellner, K. F., Bennett, A., Weston, T., Presgrove, J., and Belant, J. L. Wild harvests could aid food insecurity and reduce wildlife hyperabundance. *BioScience* 75 (1; 2025): 9-14.

MassWildlife strives to meet wildlife population goals.<sup>10</sup> Public comments included a range of sentiments related to the role of hunting in managing wildlife populations to meet population goals and promoting overall ecosystem health. Across all three issues, those in support of expanded hunting access often cited wildlife conservation as the reason for their support. Additionally, commenters expressed the importance of modern, science-based management and the need to remove outdated laws that do not have an ecological basis.

Regulated hunting is one of the most important tools used by state fish and wildlife agencies across the country to manage wildlife and habitat. The idea of hunting as a legal right subject to management and regulation is based on the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which was created over 100 years ago in response to overharvest. Used in the United States and Canada, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is the world's most successful system of policies and laws to restore and safeguard fish and wildlife and their habitats through sound science and active management. This model rests on a series of guiding principles, including the concepts that wildlife resources are a public trust belonging to everyone, everyone has an equal opportunity under the law to participate in hunting and fishing, and scientific management is the proper means for wildlife conservation.<sup>11</sup>

Without population management, there can be negative consequences of overabundant wildlife. Public comments shared sentiments related to the need for science-based wildlife management, importance of ecosystem and forest health, deer density issues, wildlife health and disease management, and the need to manage overabundant deer in suburban/urban areas. Overabundant deer contribute to increased human-wildlife conflict, vehicle collisions, the spread of tick-borne disease, degradation of forests, and crop damage

*“Our position has evolved in recognition of the evidence of severe damage to forests from the overpopulation of deer in many parts of the state... Restoring and conserving resilient forest habitats requires reductions of deer populations in much of the Commonwealth. Expanding access to hunting by modifying current laws and regulations is a step in that direction.”* — **Heidi Ricci, Director of Policy & Advocacy of Mass Audubon**

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<sup>10</sup> Gortázar, C., and Fernandez-de-Simon, J. One tool in the box: the role of hunters in mitigating the damages associated to abundant wildlife. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 68 (3; 2022): 28.

<sup>11</sup> Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. <https://www.fishwildlife.org/landing/north-american-model-wildlife-conservation>. Accessed March 20, 2026.

at local farms.<sup>12,13,14,15,16</sup> In areas where hunting is limited, especially in eastern Massachusetts and the Islands, deer populations exceed management goals set by biologists. Statewide, the target density is 12–18 deer per square mile, yet MassWildlife estimates over 100 deer per square mile on the Islands in areas closed to hunting.

Many conservation partners view the expansion of hunting access through Sunday hunting, the expanded use of crossbows, and reduced setbacks as consistent with the ecological goal of reducing deer populations. For example, in its letter of support, Mass Audubon emphasized the importance of science-based deer management strategies to combat the degradation of Massachusetts’ forest habitats, including the loss of native plant species, the facilitation of invasive plants, habitat reduction, and impacts on forest regeneration.

### ***The economic contributions of hunters and hunting to communities and conservation***

Commenters in support of changing hunting laws mentioned the important economic contributions hunting provides to conservation, Massachusetts communities, and local businesses. Hunters and anglers contribute significantly to wildlife conservation through license fees and federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, which are the primary sources of funds for state fish and wildlife agencies throughout the country. Some commenters expressed that changing the laws would help keep Massachusetts hunters spending here in Massachusetts and attract more non-resident hunters to Massachusetts. In 2025, Massachusetts hunting licenses were sold to over 56,800 residents and over 5,500 non-residents from all other 49 states. Hunters support local jobs and businesses by spending money on gear, lodging, food, and other services.<sup>17,18</sup> Massachusetts hunters’ direct spending in 2022 amounted to \$272 million, including purchases of hunting equipment, licenses, trips, and more. The money spent by hunters helped create and support an estimated 2,360 Massachusetts jobs, paying \$177 million in salaries and wages. Additionally, hunter spending added \$212 million to the Massachusetts GDP, \$28

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<sup>12</sup> Waring, G. H., Griffis, J. L., and Vaughn, M. E. White-tailed deer roadside behavior, wildlife warning reflectors, and highway mortality. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 29 (1-4; 1991): 215-223.

<sup>13</sup> Waller, D. M., and Alverson, W. S. The white-tailed deer: a keystone herbivore. *The Wildlife Society Bulletin* (1997): 217-226.

<sup>14</sup> Côté, S. D., Rooney, T. P., Tremblay, J. P., Dussault, C., and Waller, D. M. (2004). Ecological impacts of deer overabundance. *Annu. Rev. Ecol. Evol. Syst.* 35 (1; 2004): 113-147.

<sup>15</sup> Bell, M. E., Mason, D. S., Kellner, K. F., Hill, J. E., Stewart, C., and Belant, J. L. Nonlinear relationships between deer harvests, agriculture, and deer-vehicle collisions. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 118 (2026): 108306.

<sup>16</sup> DeNicola, A. J., and Williams, S. C. Sharpshooting suburban white-tailed deer reduces deer-vehicle collisions. *Human-Wildlife Conflicts* 2 (1; 2008): 28-33.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-associated Recreation*. (2022).

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *Big-game Hunters: Demographic Characteristics and Expenditures*. (2025).

million in state and local taxes, and \$42 million in federal taxes. When considering the ripple effects throughout the state economy, hunting created a total economic impact of \$408 million.<sup>19</sup> National studies estimate that, in 2022 alone, the total economic impact created by hunting contributed over \$107 billion to the U.S. economy.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Benefits of hunting to local farms and landscaping businesses***

Common wildlife like deer, bear, coyote, geese, and wild turkey can cause substantial damage to farms and landscaping businesses, leading to lost crops and livestock, reduced yields, and increased management expenses for farmers, including costly exclusion solutions. For example, at a cost of up to \$30/ft to install in Massachusetts, deer exclusion fencing for farms costs \$5,000–10,000+ per acre depending on the shape being enclosed, making it a significant barrier for farmers and often leaving hunting as the only viable strategy for limiting wildlife damage.

Regulated hunting is a low-cost, long-term management option for farmers experiencing agricultural damage from wildlife.

A total of eleven different organizations and businesses related to agriculture and landscaping including the Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers, Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation, Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association, and Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association, voiced support for changing the statutes to expand hunting opportunity to reduce economic losses experienced by farms and

*“White-tailed deer and black bears present significant threats to the viability of our farms. The increasing populations are causing widespread economic losses through crop destruction, while bears are increasingly responsible for livestock fatalities. Economic Loss: Farmers lose over \$1 million annually in direct crop damage. Contamination: Beyond consumption, crops are often rendered unharvestable by food safety regulations if deer feces are found nearby... Our Massachusetts farms are small, and many operate at break-even or a loss. They simply cannot afford to “donate” 20% or more of their land to wildlife feeding.” — Dan Bosley, Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation*

landscaping businesses from wildlife. Several farmers shared stories of significant economic losses from deer and bear and increased management costs in trying to prevent this damage.

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<sup>19</sup> Sportsmen’s Alliance. *Senate Handouts Massachusetts* (2024).

<sup>20</sup> Southwick Associates. *Hunting in America: An Economic Force for Conservation* (2024).

## ***Hunting to improve public health and safety***

Public comments included sentiments related to the role of hunting in managing wildlife populations to address public health and safety. Whether commenting on hunting on Sunday, the expanded use of crossbows or reduced setbacks, those sentiments included mentions of wildlife-vehicle collisions, tick-borne illnesses and tick reduction, and property damage. Each year, approximately 1 out of every 117 drivers is involved in a deer-vehicle collision in Massachusetts.<sup>21</sup>

Some individual commenters, as well as organizations like Tick Free MV and the Mass. Nursery and Landscape Association, shared their support for changing the hunting statutes as a strategy to harvest more deer and address the growing prevalence of tick-borne illness. In Massachusetts, certain kinds of ticks can bite people, spreading diseases like Lyme disease, babesiosis, anaplasmosis, tularemia, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, *Borrelia miyamotoi*, and Powassan virus.<sup>22</sup>

White-tailed deer, turkeys, white-footed mice, and other mammals are hosts for ticks. While deer density reductions alone are unlikely to directly impact tick abundance, they can improve the efficacy of alternative strategies like moxidectin treated baits, backyard treatments with pyrethroids, and 4-poster devices. With fewer deer on the landscape, less bait and chemicals are required.

## ***Benefits of increasing hunting participation***

Many commenters mentioned the importance of changing the statutes to increase hunting access and opportunity, attract new hunters, and reduce barriers. The most recent national survey estimated 14.4 million adults participated in hunting in 2022. That is approximately 300,000 fewer hunters than in 1991, at time when the U.S. population had grown by 76 million people, significantly reducing the proportion of people who hunt in the

*“Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses and allergies, most predominantly Alpha-Gal Syndrome represent one of the most significant public health threats to our community. This past summer, 19% of the total patients to our practice were tick-related. This is a staggering number. From a public health perspective, effective deer population management is a critical component of comprehensive tick control strategy.”*  
— **Jeff Levy of West Tisbury, CEO of Martha’s Vineyard Medical**

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<sup>21</sup> State Farm. *Industry Animal Collision Claims*. (2025).

<sup>22</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Tick-borne disease prevention. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/tick-borne-disease-prevention>. Accessed February 5, 2026.

U.S. population.<sup>23,24</sup> Both national studies, as well as MassWildlife’s own data, show the most commonly cited barriers to hunting participation are time constraints, age or health reasons, and lack of access.<sup>25,26</sup> Less than 1% of Massachusetts residents now hold a hunting license. Massachusetts is losing hunters primarily because many participants are getting older and new hunters are not starting at the same rate. This general decline in hunting participation is occurring both in Massachusetts and across the country. The conceptualization of the hunter Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) movement was driven by national declines in hunting participation and the implicit importance of hunting activity, both to achieve wildlife management goals and for funding state fish and wildlife management activities. The [Massachusetts R3 Plan](#) identifies a variety of tactics MassWildlife uses to reduce barriers to hunting participation, including land protection and access, education programs, building partnerships, simplifying regulations, and providing self-learning tools, such as tips for finding hunting locations.

MassWildlife received thousands of comments from individual hunters as well as 36 hunting and fishing organizations in support of expanding hunting opportunities and access. Hunting provides a wide variety of experiences and opportunities, fulfilling a complex array of basic human needs by providing sustenance, creating a connection to the natural world, fostering human connection to friends and family, supporting emotional wellbeing, and offering a unique and challenging experience.<sup>27</sup> Public comments included sentiments that emphasized the recreational importance of hunting, ensuring access and opportunity for hunters with varying interests and capabilities to experience the outdoors. Particularly for comments in support of hunting on Sunday and the expanded use of crossbows, respondents mentioned the need for more time to hunt with family and friends, the importance of equal access to the outdoors, hunting as a right and as part of an important outdoor heritage, and hunting as a long-held tradition. National studies confirm a significant portion of the public supports recreational reasons for hunting, including spending time in nature (65%) and spending time with family and friends (63%).<sup>28</sup> While a large majority of American adults (73%) approve of hunting, an even larger number of Americans (86%) agree that it is okay if other people hunt, regardless of their own opinions

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<sup>23</sup> US Fish and Wildlife Service. *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*. (1991 and 2022).

<sup>24</sup> US Census Bureau. *American Community Survey*. (2022).

<sup>25</sup> MassWildlife. Annual hunter survey. (2024).

<sup>26</sup> Responsive Management. *Assessing the Quality and Availability of Hunting and Shooting Access in the United States*. (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Southwick Associates. *Public Motivations in Hunting and Target Shooting in the United States: A New Dynamic*. (2024).

<sup>28</sup> See note 2 above.

of the activity. The same national survey found that 81% of Americans living in the Northeastern U.S. agree that it is okay for other people to hunt.<sup>29</sup>

### **Falconry**

Falconry is the practice of using a bird of prey to hunt. Falconers must comply with strict federal and state regulations, including holding a Massachusetts hunting license, passing a written exam, and having appropriate facilities and equipment to care for, house, and train raptors. There are currently 62 permitted falconers in Massachusetts.

While falconers make up a small number of the overall population of hunters in Massachusetts, over 20% of all falconers participated in the listening sessions or offered a written comment. All commenters who identified themselves as falconers expressed support for changing hunting laws to expand hunting opportunity and access. They expressed the importance of more opportunity to train and hunt with the birds in their care.



Licensed falconers hunt quarry like rabbits and squirrels with trained birds of prey.

### **Opposition to changing hunting laws**

Concerns raised generally against expanding hunting opportunities included public safety, fear of hunting, reluctance to share woods and fields with hunters, perceived conflicts with other outdoor recreational users, concerns related to trespassing and noise, ethical and animal welfare considerations, and suggestions for alternative wildlife management approaches. MassWildlife takes these perspectives seriously and offers the following information to evaluate those concerns and ideas in context with available data.

Hunting is a science-based, highly regulated activity and hunting laws are strictly enforced by the Massachusetts Environmental Police. Hunting accidents are extremely rare, and most hunting injuries are caused by falls from tree stands and rarely involve non-hunters.<sup>30</sup> Hunting in Massachusetts has a strong safety record and has long coexisted with other outdoor

Most hunting injuries are caused by falls from tree stands and do not involve non-hunters. There has never been a non-hunter killed by hunting in Massachusetts.

<sup>29</sup> See note 2 above.

<sup>30</sup> International Hunter Education Association. Hunter Incident Database. <https://incidents.ihea-usa.org> Accessed February 2, 2026.

recreation. MassWildlife delivers the state’s Hunter Education program to over 3,000 students each year. All first-time hunters are required to complete a 12–16-hour Basic Hunter Education course that teaches hunting laws and ethics, safe handling and storage of firearms, and conservation. Hunters must follow strict regulations set by MassWildlife to hunt deer and other wildlife in Massachusetts, including holding all required licenses and permits. Massachusetts hunters using firearms are required to complete approved training and possess a firearms license issued by their municipal police department.



The mandated Basic Hunter Education course teaches safety, laws, and ethics to thousands of new hunters each year.

Although concerns about hunting safety are not supported by incident data, MassWildlife recognizes that perceptions of safety and comfort influence how people choose to use outdoor spaces. Feelings of fear, discomfort, and misunderstanding can result in fewer people going outside and public policies that attempt to restrict or prohibit hunting activities. As such, increasing cultural acceptance of hunting is identified as a primary goal of MassWildlife’s R3 Plan and showing respect for non-hunters is a lesson taught in Basic Hunter Education. By focusing on shared values of healthy wildlife populations, resilient habitats, and safe outdoor access for all, MassWildlife remains committed to promoting respectful, shared use of natural resources, regardless of how individuals choose to experience the outdoors. Hunters also play a critical role in maintaining public support for hunting, as actions that are seen as harmful, disrespectful, or unethical can damage support for hunting overall and undermine public trust.<sup>31</sup>

Hunters and other outdoor users, such as birders, hikers, horseback riders, and dog walkers, have safely and successfully shared forests, fields, and waterways for many years, even as hunting seasons have been lengthened to address wildlife management needs. Clear communication about hunting seasons and methods, blaze orange, and predictable hunting frameworks help reduce user conflict and promote awareness. For those people who prefer not to recreate in areas open to hunting, there remain many

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<sup>31</sup> Duda, Mark. *How to talk about hunting. Research-based communication strategies.* (Fairfax, VA: National Rifle Association Hunters’ Leadership Forum: 2020).

opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation on public and private properties where hunting is not permitted.

While limited in the comments, some people recognized overabundant deer as a concern but did not believe expanding hunting is the solution and requested the state look at alternative wildlife management approaches. MassWildlife agrees that a holistic strategy is important when addressing overabundant wildlife, which is why it dedicates significant resources to outreach and education to prevent conflict. However, MassWildlife regulates hunting not only to ensure wildlife populations persist for future generations, but also as a necessary mechanism of managing wildlife populations. Non-lethal methods to control wildlife through the use of contraceptives or sterilization have only been effective at a hyper-localized scale, and claims that these methods can be effective for broad scale free-ranging populations are unfounded.<sup>32,33,34,35,36</sup> Feasibility studies as well as previous attempts to use non-lethal methods to control wildlife populations have demonstrated these methods are ineffective, not practical, and cost prohibitive for widescale use.<sup>37,38,39</sup>

## **Statutory Recommendations: Anticipated Impacts and Justification**

MassWildlife offers the following recommendations, with consideration of public input, as well as staff expertise and other relevant research on the anticipated impacts to wildlife management, local communities and businesses, and outdoor recreation. MassWildlife also consulted with the Massachusetts Environmental Police on these recommendations for its input on enforcement, safety, and implementation considerations.

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<sup>32</sup> Boulanger, J. R., Curtis, P. D., Cooch, E. G., and DeNicola, A. J. Sterilization as an alternative deer control technique: a review. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 6 (2; 2012): 273.

<sup>33</sup> Ransom, J. I., Powers, J. G., Thompson Hobbs, N., and Baker, D. L. Ecological feedbacks can reduce population-level efficacy of wildlife fertility control. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 51 (1; 2014): 259-269.

<sup>34</sup> Boulanger, J. R., and Curtis, P. D. Efficacy of surgical sterilization for managing overabundant suburban white-tailed deer. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 40 (4; 2016): 727-735.

<sup>35</sup> Blossey, B., Curtis, P., Boulanger, J., and Dávalos, A. Red oak seedlings as indicators of deer browse pressure: Gauging the outcome of different white-tailed deer management approaches. *Ecology and Evolution* 9 (23; 2019): 13085-13103.

<sup>36</sup> Asa, C., and Moresco, A. Fertility control in wildlife: Review of current status, including novel and future technologies. *Reproductive sciences in animal conservation*. (2019): 507-543.

<sup>37</sup> Merrill, J. A., Cooch, E. G., and Curtis, P. D. Time to reduction: factors influencing management efficacy in sterilizing overabundant white-tailed deer. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* (2023): 267-279.

<sup>38</sup> Massei, G., and Cowan, D. Fertility control to mitigate human–wildlife conflicts: a review. *Wildlife Research* 41 (1; 2024): 1-21.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, M. J., Shank, G. C., Stoskopf, M. K., Minter, L. J., and DePerno, C. S. Efficacy and cost of GonaCon™ for population control in a free-ranging white-tailed deer population. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 45 (4; 2021): 589-596.

## Sunday hunting

- ⇒ **Current law:** Sunday hunting is prohibited in Massachusetts ([MGL Ch. 131, § 57](#)).
- ⇒ **MassWildlife recommendation:** Repeal the statutory ban to enable MassWildlife to allow legal hunting on Sundays during established hunting seasons. (See [Appendix E](#) for suggested statutory language). If the Sunday hunting 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.
- ⇒ **Justification:** Massachusetts is only one of two states with an outright ban on Sunday hunting. Allowing Sunday hunting promotes fair, equitable access to outdoor recreation and gives working families more opportunity to harvest their own food. There is no wildlife management or public safety reason to maintain a ban on Sunday hunting, and this change would provide MassWildlife with science-based flexibility to better manage wildlife populations and address human-wildlife conflict, such as agricultural damage.

### ***Fairness and equitable access to outdoor recreation***

Access to outdoor recreation should be equitable and reflect the diverse ways Massachusetts residents choose to spend time outdoors. Many activities, including hiking, birding, fishing, mountain biking, dog walking, and boating, are available seven days a week, all year long. Regulated hunting is the only outdoor recreation activity that is prohibited on Sundays in Massachusetts and is already limited to certain times of the year.

National research consistently shows the most frequently cited factor limiting hunter participation and satisfaction is lack of time due to work or family obligations.<sup>40</sup> This is reflected in the Massachusetts

*“As a single working mother who loves to hunt, it would be such a blessing to have Sundays to hunt. I work full time Monday through Friday during the week and it is nearly impossible to get out much if at all. I love bringing my son out with me to learn about conservation, ethical hunting, and just the love of the outdoors. It would be amazing to have the weekend to be able to get out more often and for longer periods of time!”*

**—North Adams resident**

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<sup>40</sup> Responsive Management and National Shooting Sports Foundation. *Assessing the Quality and Availability of Hunting and Shooting Access in the United States*. (2021).

Annual Hunter Survey, where “not enough time” is consistently cited as the top reason for not participating in hunting. Among a random sample of licensed hunters who reported not hunting in the previous season, as many as 52% have indicated that time constraints are the primary reason.<sup>41</sup> Not having enough time also limits the ability of hunters to mentor newcomers, which is an important tool for recruiting the next generation of hunters.

For working families, caregivers, students, and individuals with nontraditional work schedules, Sundays may be the only available time to participate in hunting. Equitable access to outdoor recreation should account for the realities of work schedules, family responsibilities, and transportation constraints faced by many Massachusetts residents. From an equity perspective, prohibiting hunting on Sundays disproportionately affects those with the least scheduling flexibility and access to open space, limiting their ability to engage in a lawful, regulated, and culturally important activity. Providing an additional day would help level the playing field by affording hunters the same opportunities already available to other outdoor users, without compromising safety. This expansion would also benefit falconers, who expressed that allowing hunting on Sunday would improve the opportunity to train and hunt with the birds in their care.

### ***Increased access to food***

While motivations among hunters vary, more hunters today are heading afield specifically to obtain local, healthy meat.<sup>42</sup> Allowing Sunday hunting would provide licensed hunters with increased opportunity to provide food for their families. Many hunters prefer hunting for food and consuming wild game meat over domestic sources of protein. Hunters value the animal they harvest and utilize as much of the animal as possible—and, most importantly, the meat is consumed and not wasted.

*“Hunting on Sundays could be the difference between putting meat in the freezer or paying high prices for beef from the grocery store to sustain my family through the year.”*  
—Halifax resident

MassWildlife further promotes the use of game meat by providing hunters with educational classes and tips on field dressing, meat preparation, cooking tips, and recipes.

### ***Public safety and interactions with other outdoor users***

Given the strong safety record of hunting in Massachusetts and surrounding states, authorizing hunting on Sundays is not a public safety issue. Some respondents who are opposed to Sunday hunting expressed safety concerns and/or a desire to have one day in

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<sup>41</sup> MassWildlife. Annual hunter surveys. (2022-2024).

<sup>42</sup> See note 31 above.

the woods without the possibility of encountering a hunter. While concerns about safety and shared use of public lands are understandable, in practice these concerns are not supported by data or decades of experience in Massachusetts. Nearly all other states in the U.S. allow hunting on Sundays ([Appendix B](#)). For those people who prefer not to recreate in areas open to hunting, there remain many opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation on public and private properties where hunting is not permitted.

### ***Expanded opportunities***

Over the past several decades, MassWildlife has significantly expanded hunting opportunity in response to healthy and growing wildlife populations—lengthening deer, bear, and turkey seasons and increasing the availability of permits. For example, the deer hunting seasons have expanded from just 31 days annually 30 years ago to as many as 128 days on the Islands and 77 days statewide in 2026. Bear hunting is now open statewide with 84 days open for hunting annually, compared to 12 days 30 years ago. The turkey hunting season has also more than doubled over the last 30 years, from 30 days available to 72. These expanded seasons have helped manage wildlife populations but have not resulted in a decline in public safety. Massachusetts continues to maintain a strong hunting safety record, demonstrating that prudent increases in hunting opportunity can be implemented responsibly.

### ***Anticipated wildlife management impact***

Adding Sundays has the potential to not only increase opportunity for hunters, but it also has the potential to increase harvest of some game species. Saturdays are the most popular day for hunting nationwide, whereas Sunday's participation and harvest are similar to other weekdays or sometimes marginally higher. Nationally, 10%–14% of the harvest from deer seasons comes from Sundays.<sup>43,44,45,46,47</sup> However, an interesting phenomenon occurs in states that allow Sunday hunting immediately surrounding Massachusetts. Each of these states has disproportionately large deer harvests (17%–26%) on Sundays compared to the national average due to their proximity to the only two states that don't allow any Sunday hunting (Massachusetts and Maine).<sup>48,49,50</sup> In fact, 31%

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<sup>43</sup> Murphy, D. A. "Effects of various opening days on deer harvest and hunting pressure." *Proceedings of the Southeastern Association of Game and Fish Commissioners*, 15 (1961): 141-146.

<sup>44</sup> Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Deer harvest data. (2025).

<sup>45</sup> Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Deer harvest data. (2025).

<sup>46</sup> Pennsylvania Game Commission. Deer harvest data. (2025).

<sup>47</sup> Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources. Deer harvest data (2025).

<sup>48</sup> New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Deer harvest data. (2024).

<sup>49</sup> Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Deer harvest data. (2025).

<sup>50</sup> Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. Deer harvest data. (2025).

of deer harvested by Massachusetts residents hunting in Rhode Island were harvested on Sundays. These facts demonstrate a clear demand by Massachusetts resident hunters to hunt on Sundays and the willingness to leave the state to meet that demand under the current prohibition.<sup>49</sup> Opening Sundays to hunters in Massachusetts would help keep that hunting demand in Massachusetts and thereby help with the local wildlife management needs and positively impact the Massachusetts economy. Additionally, allowing Sunday hunting may help reduce deer densities, which has been identified as an important piece of the state’s holistic strategy to address tick-borne illnesses.

Additionally, allowing hunting on Sundays would provide hunters the flexibility to choose prime weather days and allow for more reasonable balance of their work-life responsibilities. Annual deer harvest reports from Virginia show the impact of Sunday hunting as a weather “insurance policy” can be as high as 25% by shifting the harvest from Saturday to Sunday when an impacting event occurs on an important Saturday such as the opening Saturday of a firearm deer season.

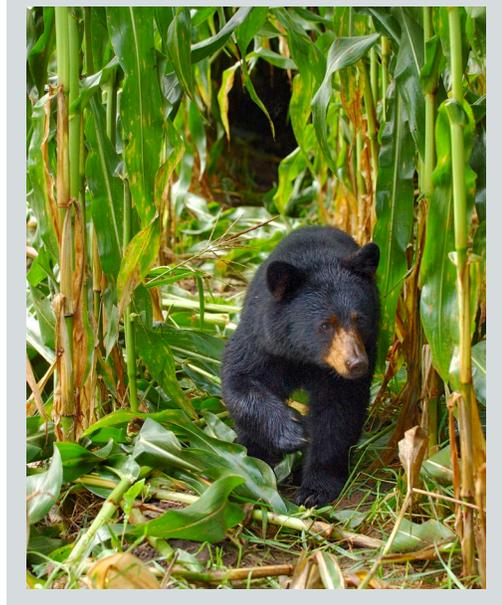
MassWildlife uses the best available science to evaluate and set species-specific season dates, bag and possession limits, and other regulations to manage wildlife populations. If Sunday hunting is no longer prohibited, MassWildlife will evaluate if other regulatory or management changes (such as adjusting permit/bag limits or shifting seasons) are necessary to account for any potential additional harvest from Sunday hunting. Under existing frameworks (see 2026 Hunting Season Summary in [Appendix G](#)), opening Sunday for hunting could add up to 21 additional days of deer hunting on the Islands and 14 on the mainland; 14 additional days for bear; 20 additional days for coyote; and 10 additional days for turkey. Lifting the Sunday hunting statutory ban would allow MassWildlife—through the public regulatory process—to determine when and under what conditions Sunday hunting may be permitted.

### ***Economic benefits***

MassWildlife sold 62,361 hunting licenses in 2025, which is a decrease of 15% since 2015. Of Massachusetts hunting licenses sold, 56,857 are resident licenses, and 5,504 are non-resident licenses. Given the proximity of Massachusetts to other New England and Northeast states, Massachusetts has an opportunity to both keep Massachusetts hunters in Massachusetts and attract non-resident hunters from neighboring states by making Sundays available. Hunting is allowed on Sundays in all surrounding states except Maine. Weekend days are the most valuable days for hunting and as highlighted above there is clear demand by Massachusetts hunters that are leaving the state on Sundays to hunt in neighboring states without the ability to hunt in their home state.

### **Protecting local farms and landscaping businesses**

Regulated hunting is a low-cost, long-term solution for farmers experiencing agricultural damage from overabundant wildlife. Wildlife-related damage can result in significant economic losses for farmers through crop damage, livestock predation, and increased management costs. At a cost of up to \$30/ft to install in Massachusetts, deer exclusion fencing for farms costs \$5,000–10,000+ per acre depending on the shape being enclosed, making it a significant barrier for farmers and often leaving hunting as the only viable strategy for limiting wildlife damage. While many farmers allow licensed hunters to hunt on their property, that hunting activity is currently limited to six days of the



week. Farmers using [Farmer/Landowner permits](#) to address agricultural damage from wildlife must still follow the hunting season frameworks. Allowing Sunday hunting would expand options for farmers experiencing significant wildlife damage by allowing the use of these permits on Sundays.

*“We regularly hear from farmers who are already operating under extremely challenging conditions and for whom deer and bear browse represent a significant additional financial burden. Beyond direct crop losses, farmers raise concerns about the high cost of fencing and other deterrents. These added expenses can be the final strain for operations already facing narrow margins. Allowing hunters to help manage local deer and bear population is a no cost alternative, and any statutory changes that increase hunting opportunity and harvest pressure are highly desirable from an agricultural perspective.”*

**—Max Feldman, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust**

## Hunting with a crossbow

- ⇒ **Current law:** Hunting with a crossbow is prohibited by statute and only allowed under permit for those with a permanent disability that prevents them from operating a conventional vertical bow and arrow, as certified by a licensed physician ([MGL Ch. 131, § 64](#) and [§ 69](#)).
- ⇒ **MassWildlife recommendation:** Remove the statutory ban on crossbow hunting, enabling MassWildlife to regulate hunting with a crossbow during established hunting seasons. (See [Appendix E](#) for suggested statutory language). If the crossbow hunting statute was repealed, MassWildlife biologists would use the best available science to determine when and under what conditions hunting with a crossbow may be permitted through the public regulatory process.
- ⇒ **Justification:** Permitted archery equipment, including crossbows, are safe, effective, and ethical hunting implements. Allowing MassWildlife to regulate the use of crossbows will help the agency reach wildlife management goals and provide more equitable hunting opportunities for all.

## Accessibility and fairness

In a recent national study, many crossbow hunters said the equipment provided them with an option to enjoy hunting that they otherwise would not have due to advanced age, limited mobility, or injury.<sup>51</sup> Massachusetts current law requires a permitted crossbow hunter to have a permanent disability that prohibits them from using a conventional vertical bow. This permit is permanent, and once obtained, the individual is not allowed to switch back to conventional archery equipment, providing no option for someone who has a temporary injury or limitation or just prefers to use different implements for different situations. Under the current law, the hunter's



Conventional vertical archery equipment like this compound bow requires physical strength and endurance to draw back and hold.

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<sup>51</sup> Archery Trade Association and Responsive Management. *Crossbow Hunting in the United States: Understanding crossbow hunters' participation, characteristics, and the factors that contribute to their retention in hunting.* (2025).

disability must be certified by a licensed physician, which can be a costly and time-consuming barrier. There is also significant staff time spent by MassWildlife to process several hundreds of these applications annually to issue crossbow permits.

Commenters during the public listening sessions remarked on the importance of allowing crossbows to increase access for certain hunters who may not be able to pull back a compound bow, including smaller-statured hunters, new/youth hunters, female hunters, or aging hunters. In 2024, 41% of all resident hunters in Massachusetts were aged 60 and older. Allowing crossbows for all hunters would improve accessibility for hunters with temporary physical limitations or injuries as well as aging hunters, in support of the Healey-Driscoll Administration's [E.O. No. 642: Instituting Age-Friendly Practices](#).

### ***Flexibility and popularity***

A hunter's choice of implement depends on the types of legal implements allowed by regulation, cost and availability, ability and skill, and personal preference and ethics. Crossbow hunting has been steadily gaining popularity in recent years,<sup>52</sup> and many states now allow crossbows for hunting ([Appendix C](#)). The laws governing current crossbow use in Massachusetts are the most restrictive in the Northeast and crossbows are permitted for all hunters in each of the Northeast states except Massachusetts. In a recent national study, many crossbow hunters said that crossbows provided them greater ease and stability to make the hunting experience more enjoyable, in comparison with other hunting implements, or they used a crossbow because they felt it increased their harvest success rate.<sup>53</sup> Since 2001, MassWildlife has issued over 16,700 crossbow permits to hunters who would have otherwise not have been able to hunt with a conventional vertical bow due to their disability.

### ***Anticipated wildlife management impact***

Removing the prohibition to hunt with crossbows would allow MassWildlife—through the public regulatory process—to determine for which hunting seasons and species crossbows could be used. Approximately 15% of currently licensed Massachusetts hunters already have a crossbow permit. Crossbows are most often used to target deer, but permitted hunters with a permanent disability also use crossbows in Massachusetts to hunt bear, turkey, and other species where conventional vertical archery equipment is allowed (Table 3).

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<sup>52</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>53</sup> See note 51 above.

Table 3. Massachusetts 2024 harvest figures, by hunting implement.

Implement	Deer	Spring Turkey	Fall Turkey	Bear
Shotgun	4,980	2,690	63	26
Bow	5,306	133	83	34
Crossbow	2,266	56	54	22
Muzzleloader	2,485	Included with shotgun	Included with shotgun	Included with rifle
Revolver	N/A	N/A	N/A	0
Rifle	N/A	N/A	N/A	182

Archery hunting is safe, effective, and an essential tool for managing deer and other wildlife, especially in suburban and urban areas where there are greater concerns for human-wildlife conflict.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55,56,57</sup> Archery is already the most popular method for hunting deer in Massachusetts, and crossbows are growing in popularity, with 35% of deer (5,306) taken last year with conventional vertical archery equipment and 15% (2,266) with a crossbow.

### **Safety and ethics**

Bowhunting has long been recognized as a safe and effective hunting method. Modern archery equipment, including crossbows, incorporate advanced safety features and multiple fail-safes that further reduce the risk of accidents when used responsibly.

There were mixed public sentiments shared about the perceived safety and ethics of using crossbows. Some commenters who opposed changing the crossbow statute expressed safety and ethical concerns based on their belief that crossbow hunters may be less experienced or skilled than vertical bowhunters and may be more likely to take shots at a farther distance than vertical bowhunters. However, others in support of crossbow hunting said they believe crossbow hunting is more ethical than hunting with a conventional

<sup>54</sup> Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation. 2026 Issue Brief, States Program Team.

<https://online.fliphtml5.com/ainum/qdiz/> Accessed January 28, 2026.

<sup>55</sup> Warren, R. J. Deer overabundance in the USA: recent advances in population control. *Animal Production Science* 51 (4; 2011): 259-266.

<sup>56</sup> Diefenbach, D. R., Knox, W. M., and Rosenberry, C. S. The future of managing ungulate species: White-tailed deer as a case study. *Harvest of fish and wildlife*. (2021): 327-340.

<sup>57</sup> Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. Deer harvest data. (2022).

vertical bow because the equipment allows for more humane harvests, better recovery, and increased accuracy.

Recent research found that most crossbow hunters in the Northeast said their greatest comfortable distance shooting at game is between 31 and 40 yards, which is similar to distances provided by vertical bowhunters.<sup>58</sup> When asked about their skill level at hunting with a crossbow, 50% consider themselves intermediate, 39% consider themselves advanced, and 11% consider themselves at the beginner stage.<sup>59</sup> In the Massachusetts Basic Hunter Education course required of all first-time hunters, instructors teach the importance of safe shooting distances, how to choose a hunting implement based on species and location, and ethical shot placement for all legal implements. MassWildlife delivers an optional Bowhunter Education course that focuses on safety, tree stands, archery equipment, shooting techniques, responsibility, and game recovery. MassWildlife also offers temporary archery ranges on select Wildlife Management Areas that are free for the public to practice using both vertical bows and crossbows.

*“What lies beyond—  
The knowledge that the entire  
path of a shot, including the  
area beyond the target, is safe.”*  
— **Basic Hunter Education Curriculum**



A vertical compound bow (left) and crossbow (right) are both safe, ethical hunting implements. MassWildlife’s Hunter Education courses teach safety principles for any legal implement.



This crossbow is loaded with a cranking motion, making it accessible for hunters who cannot pull back a compound bow.

<sup>58</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>59</sup> See note 51 above.

## Setback limits for hunting

- ⇒ **Current law:** Massachusetts statutes prohibit hunting within 500 feet of a dwelling in use without landowner permission or discharge of a firearm or archery equipment within 150 feet of a road ([MGL Ch. 269, § 12E](#) and [MGL Ch. 131, § 58](#)).
- ⇒ **MassWildlife recommendation:** Reduce the minimum hunting setback distance from 500 feet to 250 feet from a dwelling in use for hunting with archery equipment, except as authorized by the owner or occupant thereof, and eliminate the hunting setback for falconry. MassWildlife recommends maintaining the existing discharge setback from roads and maintaining the minimum setback distance of 500 feet from a dwelling in use for hunting with all other legal hunting implements except with landowner permission. (See [Appendix E](#) for suggested statutory language).
- ⇒ **Justification:** Reducing the minimum setback distance for bowhunting and removing the setback for falconry would open more land to hunting, especially in areas where wildlife populations are exceeding management goals. Setting the bowhunting setback at 250 feet from a dwelling, except as authorized by the owner or occupant thereof, provides additional tools for wildlife management, maintains a high safety standard, and balances landowner concerns.

## Safety

Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the United States, behind New Jersey and Rhode Island. Setbacks around roads and houses are important for public safety, however Massachusetts has more restrictive hunting setbacks for archery and falconry than other states in the Northeast ([Appendix D](#)). In New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the country, the setback distance for archery hunting from an elevated structure, such as a tree stand, is 150 feet from a building (with additional distance required from school playgrounds).

Bowhunting is a safe, effective, and essential tool for wildlife management. There has never been a fatality of a non-hunter due to hunting in Massachusetts, and there has never been a non-hunter injured from archery hunting in Massachusetts.<sup>60</sup> Applying the same setback distance for hunters using firearms and archery equipment does not recognize the substantial differences in effective range and how these hunting implements function.

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<sup>60</sup> International Hunter Education Association. Hunter Incident Database. <https://incidents.ihea-usa.org> Accessed February 2, 2026.

Bowhunters typically hunt from elevated positions or tree stands which means an arrow is shot downward into the target or into the ground. Whether bowhunting from a tree stand or the ground, a hunting arrow, under most conditions, cannot travel any appreciable distance once it hits even a twig or small limb.

Additionally, recent research found that most crossbow hunters in the Northeast said their farthest comfortable distance shooting at game is between 31–40 yards (93–120 feet), which is similar to distances provided by vertical bowhunters.<sup>61</sup> Setting the setback at 250 feet is well beyond the typical shooting distance of a bowhunter, whether using a conventional vertical bow or crossbow.

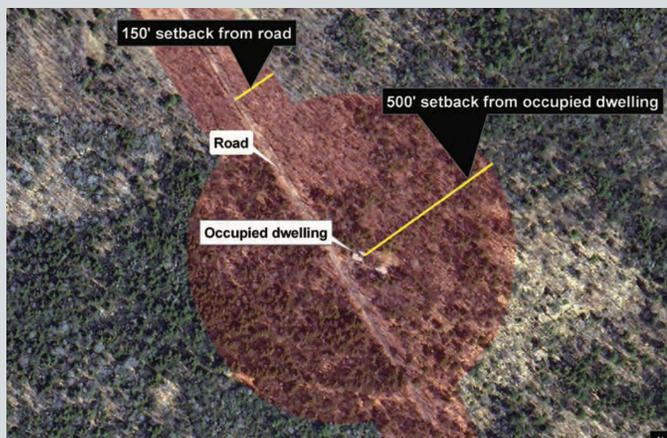
MassWildlife also recommends removing the hunting setback for falconry. Falconers are currently subject to the same hunting setbacks from buildings and roads as hunters using firearms or archery equipment. The public safety concerns that hunting setbacks are designed to address are not present in falconry, as it is a highly regulated hunting method that poses no projectile-related risk to nearby buildings or people.

### **Hunting access**

Both national studies, as well as MassWildlife’s own data, show one of the most cited barriers to hunting participation is a lack of access.<sup>62,63</sup>



Most bowhunters hunt from an elevated position, sending the trajectory of the arrow downward.



This graphic illustrates how the hunting setback looks around a single home and a nearby road. To estimate how much land is included in that setback, imagine a large circle with the house at the center, extending 500 feet in every direction. This is equivalent to the setback covering roughly 18 acres around every house.

<sup>61</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>62</sup> MassWildlife. Annual hunter survey. (2024).

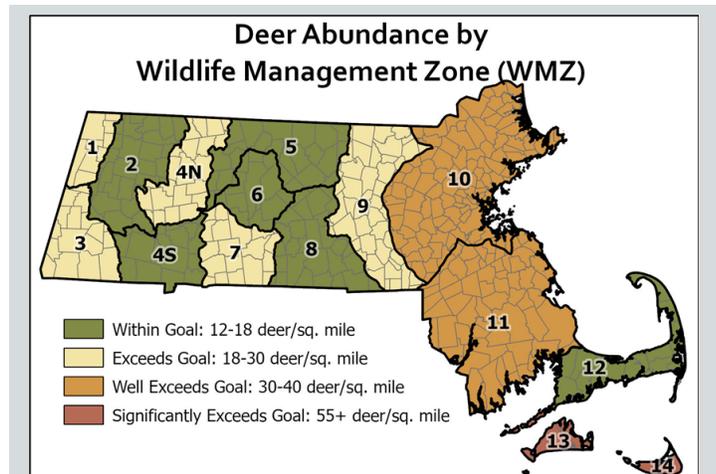
<sup>63</sup> See note 40 above.

Access limitations may be real, due to restricted land availability or accessibility, or perceived, due to a lack of awareness or assumptions about access.<sup>64</sup> Discharge setbacks, in addition to town bylaws, firearm restrictions, and other open space limitations, hinder hunting participation. To maintain and increase hunting participation, opening more land for hunting is critical.

With a hunting setback of 500 feet from a dwelling, each house in Massachusetts effectively closes 18 acres to hunting as a setback. The loss of hunting access setbacks cause is exacerbated by sprawl and rapid development of the landscape. The zoning regulations in many communities in Massachusetts require a 1- or 2-acre minimum lot size for all new houses<sup>65</sup> and this low zoning density contributes to greater loss of hunting access.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Anticipated wildlife management impact***

Having large hunting setbacks limits the amount of land open to hunting, especially in eastern Massachusetts where open space is limited and deer populations are high. National surveys show that most deer harvested with a bow are shot at distances of 60 feet or less,<sup>67,68</sup> which make it ideal for hunting in and around urban and suburban areas. The [bear population](#) is also increasing and expanding to the east. MassWildlife estimates changing the setback for bowhunting from 500 feet to 250 feet from a dwelling could open up to 764,117 additional acres to hunting (Table 4).



In WMZs with adequate hunting access, deer numbers are within MassWildlife's management goals. In WMZs where hunting is limited, deer densities exceed management goals and negatively impact habitat.

<sup>64</sup> MassWildlife. *R3 Plan: Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation for Fishing, Hunting, and Shooting Sports*. (2023).

<sup>65</sup> Massachusetts Audubon Society. *Losing Ground, IV Edition*. (2009).

<sup>66</sup> O'Shea, Tom. "Losing Hunting Access in Massachusetts." *Massachusetts Wildlife*. (2009).

<sup>67</sup> Pope and Young Club. *Bowhunting big game records of North America* (9th ed.; 2023).

<sup>68</sup> Morton, R. T., Guynn Jr, D., Hortman, R., and Williams, J. Efficiency of archery hunting for white-tailed deer on Medway Plantation. In *Proceedings of Annual Conference of Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies* (Vol. 49; 1995): 43.

Table 4. Comparison of hunting setbacks for different subject areas, in acres. The 150-foot setback column lists the difference in acreage open to hunting between a 150- and a 500-foot setback from buildings. The 250-foot setback column lists the difference in area between a 250- and a 500-foot setback from buildings. All acreage estimates are based on a MassWildlife staff analysis conducted in January 2026.

Area	150-foot setback	250-foot setback
Statewide	1,142,640 acres	764,117 acres
On state-owned lands currently open to hunting (includes MassWildlife’s WMAs and WCEs, and some DCR properties)	48,541 acres	40,661 acres
Within established bear range	505,956 acres	354,182 acres
Within expanding bear range	191,518 acres	120,967 acres
Within zones where deer densities exceed management goals (WMZs 1, 3, 4N, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14)	755,726 acres	492,411 acres

MassWildlife manages more than 239,000 acres of Wildlife Management Areas that are open to a wide range of outdoor recreation, including hunting, fishing, hiking, and birding, and the amount of conserved land continues to grow. Several DCR properties are open to hunting as well. If the hunting setback was reduced to 250 feet from buildings, over 40,000 additional acres of land would open to bowhunting on state-owned lands. Reducing the hunting setback would also complement MassWildlife’s ongoing efforts to work closely with municipalities, private landowners, NGOs, and other partners to address wildlife damage and increase access and opportunity for hunters. Recent examples include the Town of Concord opening town lands to hunting for the first time in 2026 and the reopening of the 865-acre Punkhorn Parklands in Brewster to archery hunting after a 30-year closure in 2022. Mass Audubon has established a [white-tailed deer management plan](#), which allows hunting on several of its properties in response to overabundant deer. The Trustees also has a [Deer Management Plan and hunting policy](#), allowing hunting on many of its properties, acknowledging the important role of hunting as an effective way to manage for healthy wildlife populations and promote resilient ecosystems.<sup>69</sup> Five years after instituting a controlled deer hunt at its Worlds End Property in Hingham, the Trustees documented through vegetation monitoring and surveys that ecological health is improving and fewer deer are being observed and harvested.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> The Trustees. “Hunting Policy.” <https://thetrustees.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/trustees-hunting-policy-no-appendix.pdf> (2022). Accessed March 6, 2026.

<sup>70</sup> The Trustees. “World’s End Deer Hunt.” <https://thetrustees.org/content/hunting-at-worlds-end/> Accessed March 6, 2026.

### **Protecting public health**

White-tailed deer are a host for several tick species within Massachusetts that carry tick-borne illnesses including Lyme disease and Alpha-gal Syndrome. Individual commenters, as well as organizations like Tick Free MV and the Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association, shared their support for reducing hunting setback distances as a strategy for harvesting more deer and

addressing the growing prevalence of tick-borne illness in

Massachusetts. Having adequate hunting access to meet wildlife management goals is of particular concern in areas of the state with limited open space and high deer densities, including eastern Massachusetts and the Islands.

While the statewide goal for deer across Massachusetts is 12–18 deer per square mile, MassWildlife estimates there are over 100 deer per square mile on the Islands in areas closed to hunting and tick-borne illness is a significant concern. Reducing the setback will

provide hunting access where it is most needed for wildlife management. While reducing deer density alone will not have a measurable public health impact, managing deer populations is an important part of a combined strategy to address tick-borne illness in Massachusetts. A reduction in deer density can improve the efficiency and efficacy of alternative strategies like moxidectin treated baits, backyard treatments with pyrethroids, and 4-poster devices. With fewer deer on the landscape, less bait and chemicals are required.

### **A balanced recommendation of 250 feet**

While MassWildlife acknowledges the potential additional wildlife management benefit of reducing the bowhunting setback to 150 feet from buildings (Table 4), the recommendation to reduce the setback to 250 feet at this time recognizes the need to balance the wildlife management benefit with public sentiment. Respondents who commented they would like the existing setback distances to be maintained raised concerns about safety, privacy,

*“Deer are the primary reproductive hosts of ticks and the high deer densities on Martha’s Vineyard are contributing to the tick overabundance that is driving the health crisis... Like many communities in New England, we’ve been living with the sometimes-devastating impacts of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases for far too long. On top of that, we are now experiencing the explosion of Alpha-gal Syndrome, a potentially life-threatening allergy to red meat and dairy, resulting from tick bites.”*

**— Virginia Barbatti, Tick Free MV**

noise, trespassing, conflict with neighbors, and general fear and anxiety of allowing hunting to occur closer to homes. If the hunting setback distance set is not considered acceptable by the public at large, it could result in more landowners posting their land against hunting, which would have the opposite intended result by closing more land to hunting.

A bowhunting setback of 250 feet from buildings is in line with policies of neighboring states, provides wildlife management benefits, improves hunter access and opportunity, exceeds the standard distance at which most bowhunters target game, and maintains a high public safety standard.

It is important to note that MassWildlife's recommendation still allows landowners to grant permission for hunting within the 250-foot setback, as is done now. MassWildlife's Basic Hunter Education curriculum includes lessons about the importance of fostering positive relations between hunters and landowners, how to find places to hunt and identify the property owner, and guidance on how to obtain landowner permission. While a hunter can hunt on any private property that is not posted in Massachusetts, MassWildlife's Hunter Education Program recommends getting written permission as a best practice to show respect for landowners.

## **Conclusion: MassWildlife's Mission to Conserve Wildlife**

In conclusion, the recommended legislative changes to expand hunting access and opportunity would strengthen MassWildlife's ongoing wildlife management and conservation efforts (see [Appendix E](#) for redline text of proposed statutory amendments). Within its existing regulatory authority, MassWildlife already promotes hunting by optimizing seasons based on sound science, expanding public access, working with partners to open additional lands to hunting, and providing education and training for hunters. While MassWildlife has made great progress in expanding hunting opportunity and access within its regulatory authority, current hunting statutes limit MassWildlife's ability to fulfill its conservation mission.

Over the past several decades, MassWildlife has significantly expanded hunting opportunity in response to healthy and growing wildlife populations—lengthening seasons and increasing the availability of permits. Importantly, these expansions have not led to declines in public safety, demonstrating that carefully managed increases in hunting opportunity can be implemented in safe and responsible manner.

The proposed statutory changes would complement MassWildlife's existing efforts and help the agency better meet the Commonwealth's current wildlife management and

conservation needs, while supporting wildlife-dependent outdoor recreation. Successful implementation of any statutory changes would include extensive public outreach and education, ongoing monitoring of impacts to wildlife, incorporating feedback from hunters and the public, and potential regulatory changes following an evaluation of impacts as outlined in [Appendix F](#). MassWildlife has developed a fact sheet on these recommendations to support outreach efforts ([Appendix H](#)).

## Appendix A. Public Comment Themes

### Sunday Hunting

Table 5. Top five comment themes shared related to Sunday hunting, in order of frequency from top to bottom.

Comment Theme	Position
More time to hunt with work and family obligations	Support removing ban
One day of rest and quiet without hunting	Oppose removing ban
Importance of recruiting new hunters and retaining existing hunters	Support removing ban
Safety risk to non-hunters	Oppose removing ban
Need to modernize archaic and outdated ban	Support removing ban

In addition to the top 5 comment themes shared above, these themes below were shared by fewer commenters (between 1–10% of total comments).

#### Themes shared by those who oppose removing Sunday hunting ban:

- Conflict with hikers, walkers, bikers, equestrians
- Safety risk to pets
- Noise pollution
- Concerns about wildlife overharvest
- Ethical/moral opposition

#### Themes shared by those who support removing Sunday hunting ban:

- Deer population control
- Alignment with neighboring states
- Discriminatory laws (separation of church and state)
- Positive economic impact (keeping Massachusetts hunters in Massachusetts and attracting non-residents)
- Equal access to the outdoors
- Hunters' financial contribution to conservation
- Food sustenance, sovereignty, and insecurity
- Importance of hunting heritage and tradition
- Ecosystem health (forest regeneration)
- Science-based management
- Hunting as safety activity
- Reducing vehicle collisions

Some commenters who expressed support for removing the Sunday hunting ban included specific provisions related to the implementation of this change, such as limiting Sunday hunting to certain times of day, types of hunting implements, types of land, and specific hunting seasons.

### **Hunting with a crossbow**

Table 6. Top five comment themes shared related to hunting with a crossbow, in order of frequency from top to bottom.

<b>Comment Theme</b>	<b>Position</b>
Accuracy, more ethical/humane take	Support removing ban
Physical limitations and temporary injuries	Support removing ban
Ease of use	Support removing ban
Only allow for disabilities (keep status quo)	Oppose removing ban
Recruit hunters (new/youth)	Support removing ban

In addition to the top 5 comment themes shared above, these themes below were shared by fewer commenters (between 1–10% of total comments).

#### **Themes shared by those who oppose removing ban on hunting with a crossbow:**

- Crossbows are too easy/ unfair advantage
- Feel crossbows should be treated differently than other archery equipment
- Safety concerns (more powerful, longer range)
- Unethical and concern about wounding/bad shots
- Not primitive/archery heritage
- Animal rights concerns
- Too much hunting pressure

#### **Themes shared by those who support removing ban on hunting with a crossbow:**

- Fairness, equality, and inclusion for all hunters (aging, elderly, females, small-statured hunters)
- Deer population control, and urban/suburban management
- Alignment with neighboring states
- Disability permit is too strict and too difficult to get doctor sign off
- Crossbows are safe
- Modern reality (compounds are also high tech)
- Revenue and economic benefits

Some commenters who expressed support for removing the ban included specific provisions related to the implementation of this change, such as limiting hunting with a crossbow to certain seasons and zones, allowing temporary usage during injury, limiting to certain groups (seniors and youth), and requiring a proficiency test.

### **Hunting setbacks**

Table 7. Top five comment themes shared related to hunting setbacks, in order of frequency from top to bottom.

<b>Comment Theme</b>	<b>Position</b>
Reduce setbacks for archery	Support reducing setbacks
Safety risk (stray shots)	Oppose reducing setbacks
Open access to land, unlocking small parcels	Support reducing setbacks
Safety of archery, shorter range than firearms	Support reducing setbacks
Deer management (urban/suburban areas)	Support reducing setbacks

In addition to the top 5 comment themes shared above, these themes below were shared by fewer commenters (between 1–10% of total comments).

#### **Themes shared by those who oppose reducing hunting setbacks:**

- Nothing wrong with existing distances (maintain status quo)
- Fear/anxiety
- Do not want changes to hunting setbacks for firearms
- Child/pet safety
- MA is too densely populated/crowded
- Privacy/visual impact
- Psychological impact
- Trespassing/enforcement issues
- Conflict with neighbors

#### **Themes shared by those who support reducing hunting setbacks:**

- Hunting is safe
- Setbacks should be modernized
- Arbitrary nature of 500 feet
- Open land access in eastern Massachusetts
- Alignment with other states

- Importance for wildlife health/disease management
- Recruitment and retention of hunters
- Public safety and health (vehicle collisions and ticks)
- Noting that archery hunters typically are from elevated structure like a treestand, shooting downwards
- Ethical shot placement
- Agricultural relief (crop and nursery protection)
- Reduce travel distance to hunting areas

Some commenters who expressed support for reducing the hunting setbacks included specific provisions related to the implementation of this change, such as suggesting specific distances the building setback should be reduced to, reducing road setbacks, specifying which implements the building setback should be reduced for (e.g., reduce for hunting setback for archery but maintain setback for firearms).

## Appendix B. Comparison of Sunday Hunting Laws in the Northeast

State	Regulations
Massachusetts <sup>71</sup>	Hunting is prohibited on Sundays.
Connecticut <sup>72</sup>	Sunday hunting is permitted on private land for all species using any approved hunting implement allowed for the current open season, with the following restrictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hunting migratory birds is prohibited on Sundays on all land types</li> <li>• Landowner written permission is required for hunting deer, turkey, and small game on Sundays</li> <li>• Hunting on Sundays is not allowed within 40 feet of blazed public trails</li> </ul>
Delaware <sup>73</sup>	Allows Sunday hunting for deer, waterfowl, and game birds during established hunting seasons for those species on private lands, with owner permission, and on designated publicly owned lands. Portions of wildlife areas are closed to Sunday deer hunting using firearms on all or certain Sundays.
Maine <sup>74</sup>	Hunting is prohibited on Sundays.
Maryland <sup>75</sup>	Sunday deer hunting is open with date, time, location, and county restrictions. For wild turkey, Sunday hunting is permitted on Junior Hunt Day and all Sundays during any open turkey season with county and location restrictions. Sunday hunting is open for small game and furbearers during their open seasons with county and location restrictions.
New Hampshire	Sunday hunting is allowed with no restrictions.
New Jersey <sup>76</sup>	Allows deer hunting on Sundays with bow and arrow on Wildlife Management Areas and on private property only. This privilege does not extend to other public lands, such as municipal or county parks, state parks or forests, or to any Federal lands.

<sup>71</sup> <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIX/Chapter131/Section57> Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>72</sup> <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/hunting/hunting-and-trapping-information> Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>73</sup> <https://dnrec.delaware.gov/fish-wildlife/hunting/sunday/> Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/hunting-trapping/hunting/laws-rules/general-laws.html> Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>75</sup> [https://dnr.maryland.gov/huntersguide/documents/hunting\\_seasons\\_calendar.pdf](https://dnr.maryland.gov/huntersguide/documents/hunting_seasons_calendar.pdf) Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>76</sup> <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/hunting/lands-open-or-closed-to-sunday-bow-hunting/> Accessed February 5, 2026.

State	Regulations
New York <sup>77</sup>	Sunday hunting is allowed in all areas of New York State.
Pennsylvania <sup>78</sup>	Sunday hunting for any game that's in season, except migratory game birds, is allowed on specific Sundays between September and December. To hunt private land on these Sundays, written permission from the owner is required. State forests allow hunting on the approved Sundays while state parks further limit Sunday hunting dates.
Rhode Island <sup>79</sup>	Sunday hunting is allowed. Some towns restrict hunting or the discharge of firearms while other towns are closed to Sunday hunting on private lands or require written permission of the landowner and/or local police department.
Vermont	Sunday hunting is allowed in Vermont within regulated hunting season dates.
Virginia <sup>80</sup>	Sunday hunting is allowed except within 200 yards of a house of worship or any accessory structure there of or to hunt or kill any deer or bear with a gun, firearm, or other weapon with the aid or assistance of dogs.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/newyork/hunting/big-game-hunting> Accessed February 6, 2026.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/pgc/huntingandtrapping/sunday-hunting> Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>79</sup> [https://www.eregulations.com/assets/docs/resources/RI/25RIHD\\_LR.pdf](https://www.eregulations.com/assets/docs/resources/RI/25RIHD_LR.pdf) Accessed February 5, 2026.

<sup>80</sup> <https://dwr.virginia.gov/hunting/regulations/general/#sunday-hunting> Accessed February 5, 2026.

## Appendix C. Comparison of Crossbow Hunting Laws in the Northeast

State	Regulations
Massachusetts <sup>81</sup>	Hunters with a permanent disability can apply for a crossbow permit for hunting. This permit is permanent, and once obtained, the individual is not allowed to switch back to conventional archery equipment.
Connecticut <sup>82</sup>	The use of crossbows for hunting deer, turkey and all other species is permitted. Crossbows have been legal for all archery hunters since the fall season of 2013.
Delaware <sup>83</sup>	Crossbows are legal for deer hunting during all seasons. Hunters are required to wear hunter orange during specific seasons that coincide with gun hunting periods.
Maine <sup>84</sup>	Starting in 2024, the definition of "archery equipment" has been updated to include both bow and arrow and crossbow. However crossbow use is no longer permissible during muzzleloader season.
Maryland <sup>85</sup>	Crossbows are allowed for game species during any open season where a vertical bow (excluding waterfowl and certain furbearers) may be used; this permits the use of a crossbow during the entire deer bow season in all counties.
New Hampshire <sup>86</sup>	During the archery season, deer may be harvested by crossbow by anyone having an archery license in 12 Wildlife Management Units including much of southern and central New Hampshire.
New Jersey <sup>87</sup>	Crossbows are legal for use in any bow and arrow hunting season. "Bow" means any long bow, recurve bow, compound bow or crossbow.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/general-hunting-regulations> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>82</sup> <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/hunting/2026-connecticut-hunting-and-trapping-guide/hunting-laws-and-regulations> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/delaware/hunting/general-hunting-information> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/hunting-trapping/hunting/laws-rules/hunting-equipment.html> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>85</sup> [https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/pages/hunt\\_trap/ddmtreg hunt.aspx](https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/pages/hunt_trap/ddmtreg hunt.aspx) Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>86</sup> <https://nhfishgame.com/2025/08/12/new-rules-for-hunters-become-effective-september-1/> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.nj.gov/dep/fgw/pdf/2020/dighnt20-25.pdf> Accessed February 3, 2026.

State	Regulations
New York <sup>88</sup>	Starting in 2025, hunters in New York State may use a crossbow in the same seasons, places and manner as a vertical bow for hunting deer and bear. Crossbows may be used wherever and whenever bowhunting occurs, including archery only portions of certain counties.
Pennsylvania <sup>89</sup>	Crossbows are allowed for use during both archery deer and bear seasons.
Rhode Island <sup>90</sup>	Crossbows are now classified similar to other bows and are approved for use by all archery hunters during the archery deer season. However, their use for hunting wild turkey or any wild bird is prohibited.
Vermont <sup>91</sup>	Any person may use a crossbow during any hunting season that permits using a bow and arrow.
Virginia <sup>92</sup>	Crossbows are legal for use during both archery and firearm seasons, with specific permit requirements for archery-only seasons.

<sup>88</sup> <https://dec.ny.gov/things-to-do/hunting/regulations/crossbow> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.pacodeandbulletin.gov/Display/pabull?file=/secure/pabulletin/data/vol32/32-39/1674.html> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>90</sup> <https://rules.sos.ri.gov/regulations/part/250-60-00-9> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/hunt/hunting-and-trapping-opportunities/crossbow-hunting> Accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>92</sup> <https://dwr.virginia.gov/hunting/regulations/legal-use-of-firearms-and-archery-tackle/> Accessed February 3, 2026.

## Appendix D. Comparison of Hunting Setback Laws in the Northeast

State	Setback from dwellings	Setback from roads
Massachusetts <sup>93</sup>	500 feet from dwellings in use for all implements	150 feet from road with archery or firearms
Connecticut <sup>94</sup>	500 feet from dwellings for firearms, no setback for archery	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways
Delaware <sup>95</sup>	300 feet for all implements, 150 feet for archery (deer only)	No hunting/shooting on, across or within 15 yards of public roadways
Maine <sup>96</sup>	300 feet for all implements	10 feet from edge of pavement. Cannot shoot over public roadways.
Maryland <sup>97</sup>	450 feet for firearms, 150 feet for archery (exception for schools while in session, which requires a 900-foot setback for firearm). Some additional county-specific rules apply.	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways
New Hampshire <sup>98</sup>	300 feet for all implements	15 feet from Class 1-4 highways. Cannot shoot across public ways.
New Jersey <sup>99</sup>	450 feet for firearms, 150 feet for archery	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways
New York <sup>100</sup>	500 feet for firearms, 150 feet for vertical archery, 250 feet for crossbows	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/general-hunting-regulations#hunting-prohibitions> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>94</sup> <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/hunting/2026-connecticut-hunting-and-trapping-guide/hunting-laws-and-regulations> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/delaware/hunting/general-hunting-information> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/hunting-trapping/hunting/laws-rules/general-laws.html#shootingdistance> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/maryland/hunting/hunting-regulations> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/newhampshire/hunting/general-hunting-regulations> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.eregulations.com/newjersey/hunting/general-hunting-regulations> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>100</sup> <https://dec.ny.gov/things-to-do/hunting/regulations> Accessed February 2, 2026.

State	Setback from dwellings	Setback from roads
Pennsylvania <sup>101</sup>	450 feet for firearms, 150 feet for archery	No hunting/shooting on or across* public roadways. Cannot shoot within 25 yards of roadway after exiting a vehicle. (*Can shoot over/across if high enough to not pose a danger to motorists.)
Rhode Island <sup>102, 103</sup>	500 feet for firearms, 200 feet for archery	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways
Vermont <sup>104</sup>	500 feet for all implements (only if landowner posts 500 ft safety zone with VTFW official signs)	No hunting/shooting on or across public roadways

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<sup>101</sup> [https://read.nxtbook.com/pgc/huntingtrapping/20252026/general\\_hunting\\_regulations.html](https://read.nxtbook.com/pgc/huntingtrapping/20252026/general_hunting_regulations.html) Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>102</sup> <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/Statutes/TITLE20/20-13/20-13-7.htm> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>103</sup> <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/Statutes/TITLE20/20-15/20-15-1.htm> Accessed February 2, 2026.

<sup>104</sup> <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/10/113/04710> Accessed February 2, 2026.

## Appendix E. Redline Text of Proposed Statutory Amendments

Repeal [MGL Ch. 131, § 57](#) to enable MassWildlife to regulate hunting on Sundays during established hunting seasons.

### **Section 57: Sundays**

~~Section 57. Every Sunday shall be a closed season. Except as otherwise provided in sections four, thirty-one and thirty-seven, a person, on Sunday, shall not hunt any bird or mammal or carry on that day on his person a rifle, shotgun or bow and arrow or, unless otherwise permitted by law, a pistol or revolver, in any place where birds or mammals might be found. This section shall not render unlawful the possession or carrying of a rifle, shotgun, pistol, revolver or bow and arrow, for the purpose of using the same on a skeet, trap or target range, nor for the purpose of using the same for sport target shooting at artificial targets by an owner or lessee, or his guest, upon his own or leased property, or by members or guests of clubs or associations on supervised firing ranges, nor shall it prohibit the taking of mammals by means of traps, nor the training of falcons or protected species, nor the exercising of such falcons as regulated by the director.~~

Amend [MGL Ch. 131, § 69](#) and [MGL Ch. 131, § 64](#) to remove the crossbow prohibition, to enable MassWildlife to regulate hunting with a crossbow during established hunting seasons.

Additional statutes will amend language from “bow and arrow” to “archery equipment” as defined as “any bow, arrow, bolt, or crossbow,” including:

- [MGL Ch. 131, § 60: Weapons; careless or negligent use causing injury or death to another; report](#)
- [MGL Ch. 131, § 61: Weapons; careless or negligent use causing damage to property or livestock; tort liability](#)
- [MGL Ch. 131, § 62: Weapons; intoxicating liquor or drugs; punishment](#)
- [MGL Ch. 131, § 65A: Online shooting or spearing](#)

### **Section 69: ~~Bows and arrows~~ Archery equipment for hunting**

~~Section 69. A person shall not carry or use a bow and arrow archery equipment while hunting unless said bow and arrow equipment meets such requirements as may be set by rules and regulations which the director is hereby authorized to promulgate. Such rules and regulations shall prescribe general design, weight of pull, and type of bows and arrows archery equipment, and shall conform to standards generally accepted for bows and arrows archery equipment used for hunting purposes. Nothing in this paragraph~~

~~shall permit the use of crossbows by any person other than a person who is permanently disabled such that the person cannot operate a conventional bow and arrow, as certified by a licensed physician. Any costs associated with obtaining the medical documentation, re-evaluation of the information or a second medical opinion are the responsibility of the applicant claiming a permanent disability. The issuance of a crossbow permit under this section shall be subject to rules and regulations promulgated by the director.~~

A person shall not carry or use archery equipment while hunting except in compliance with regulations of the division. The director is hereby authorized to promulgate regulations to implement this section. Such regulations shall prescribe general design and weight of pull and type of archery equipment, and shall conform to standards generally accepted for hunting purposes.

**Section 64: Automatic firearms, machine guns or ~~bows~~archery equipment; use of tracer ammunition**

A person shall not use for hunting purposes any type of full automatic firearm, machine gun or submachine gun, ~~or any crossbow, except as provided in section 69~~, nor use any tracer or incendiary ammunition for hunting or outdoor target shooting purposes except on a skeet, trap, or target range.

**Amend [MGL Ch. 131, § 58](#) to reduce the minimum setback distance from 500 feet to 250 feet from a dwelling in use for hunting with archery equipment except with permission but remain at 500 feet from a dwelling in use for hunting with other legal hunting implements. Remove the hunting setback for falconry. No change to MGL Ch. 269, Section 12E.**

**Chapter 131: Section 58: Shooting upon or across highway; hunting near dwelling**

A person shall not discharge any firearm ~~or hunt by any means or release any arrow~~ upon or across any state or hard surfaced highway, or within one hundred and fifty feet, of any such highway, or possess a loaded firearm or hunt by any means on the land of another within five hundred feet of any dwelling in use, except as authorized by the owner or occupant thereof. ~~Notwithstanding the previous sentence, a person shall not discharge archery equipment upon or across a state or hard surfaced highway, or within one hundred and fifty feet, of any such highway, or hunt with archery equipment on the land of another within two hundred and fifty feet of a dwelling in use, except as authorized by the owner or occupant thereof. Nothing in this section shall apply to falconry.~~

## **Appendix F. MassWildlife’s Regulatory Authority and Related Regulations**

If statutory changes were filed and passed, the MassWildlife Director has statutory authority to promulgate regulations to further define the scope of Sunday hunting and hunting with crossbows, including the time and length of such open season, bag limits, possession limits, methods of taking, time and methods of reporting, and all other matters pertaining to such open season as they may deem necessary and expedient, and may suspend or modify the open season whenever in their opinion such action becomes necessary ([MGL Ch. 131, sec. 5](#)).

If statutory changes were made, MassWildlife would complete a thorough review of its regulations. Through a preliminary review, MassWildlife has identified several related regulations that may need adjustment if statutory changes were passed, including:

### **Sunday hunting**

List of relevant regulations that reference hunting on Sundays.

- [321 CMR 2.05\(17\): Hunting, Fishing, Trapping, and Taking of Reptiles and Amphibians in all the Counties of Massachusetts](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(2\): Migratory Game Bird Regulations](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(4\): Hunting and Tagging of Deer](#)
- [321 CMR 3.03\(3\): Special Regulations for Ludlow Wildlife Management Area](#)
- [321 CMR 3.04\(16\): Falcons, Other Raptors and Falconry](#)

### **Hunting with a crossbow**

List of relevant regulations that reference bows and arrows for consideration of crossbow.

- [321 CMR 3.01\(1\): Public Shooting Grounds and Wildlife Management Areas](#)
- [321 CMR 3.01\(3\): Hunting with Bows and Arrows](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(1\): Hunting of Bear](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(2\): Migratory Game Bird Regulations](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(3\): Hunting of Bobcat, Foxes, and Coyotes](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(4\): Hunting and Tagging of Deer](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(6\): Hunting of Pheasants, Quail, and Ruffed Grouse](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(8\): Hunting of Crows](#)
- [321 CMR 3.02\(9\): Hunting of Wild Turkey in Massachusetts](#)
- [321 CMR 3.03\(3\): Special Regulations for Ludlow Wildlife Management Area](#)

### **Hunting setbacks**

Regulation that references hunting setbacks for archery equipment.

- [321 CMR 3.01\(3\): Hunting with Bows and Arrows](#)

## Appendix G. 2026 Hunting Season Summary

The following reflects current 2026 hunting season dates as of March 13, 2026.

### Deer hunting seasons

Season	Zone	2026 Dates
Winter Deer Season	Zones 13 and 14 only	Jan. 1–Feb. 14
Early Deer Season	Zones 13 and 14 only	Sept. 21–Oct. 1
Archery Deer Season	Zones 1–14	Oct. 5–Nov. 28
Paraplegic Hunt	<a href="#">(get hunt details)</a>	Oct. 29–31
Shotgun Deer Season	Zones 1–14	Nov. 30–Dec. 12
Primitive Firearms Deer Season	Zones 1–14	Dec. 14–31

### Other hunting seasons

Species	Zone	2026 Dates
<a href="#">Black bear</a>	Zones 1–14	Sept. 7–Dec. 12
<a href="#">Wild turkey</a>	Zones 1–13	April 27–May 23; Oct. 5–Nov. 28
<a href="#">Pheasant</a> *	Zones 1–14	Oct. 17–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Quail</a> *	Zones 1–14	Oct. 17–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Ruffed grouse</a>	Zones 1–14	Oct. 17–Nov. 28
<a href="#">Crow</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Apr. 10; July 1–Dec. 31 (Mon, Fri, Sat only)
<a href="#">Bobcat</a> *	Zones 1–8	Jan. 1–Mar. 7; Dec. 21–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Coyote</a>	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Mar. 7; Oct. 17–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Cottontail rabbit</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Feb. 28; Oct. 17–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Fox (red or gray)</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Feb. 28; Nov. 2–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Gray squirrel</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Feb. 28; Sept. 2–Dec. 31

Species	Zone	2026 Dates
<a href="#">Opossum</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–31; Oct. 1–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Raccoon</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–31; Oct. 1–Dec. 31
<a href="#">Snowshoe hare</a> *	Zones 1–14	Jan. 1–Feb. 28; Oct. 17–Dec. 31

\*Closed during shotgun deer season.

[Click here for migratory game bird seasons and bag limits \(includes waterfowl, woodcock, snipe, rails\).](#)

### Youth hunts

Hunt	2026 Dates
<a href="#">Youth Deer Hunt</a>	Oct. 3
<a href="#">Youth Pheasant Hunt</a>	Sept. 5, 12, 19 and Oct. 3, 10
<a href="#">Youth Turkey Hunt</a> (Zones 1–13)	April 25

**Year-round hunting:** The following species may be taken year-round (except during shotgun deer season) by licensed hunters and falconers with no daily or seasonal bag or possession limit: English sparrow, flying squirrel, red squirrel, chipmunk, porcupine, skunk, starling, weasel, woodchuck. Falconers may hunt pheasant, bobwhite quail, ruffed grouse, cottontail rabbit, snowshoe hare, and gray squirrel from the respective opening day through March 14, and crow during the regular crow season.

**Appendix H. Modernizing Hunting Laws Fact Sheet**

# 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.