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## **Testimony relative to HB1308 & HB1122: Firearm & Hunter Safety in Public Schools**

Over the last several years, the Alton and Barnstead schools have partnered with nonprofit and government agencies to offer a variety of outdoor, archery, firearm safety, and hunter safety classes. Through various partnerships with the TL Storer Reservation and New Hampshire Fish & Game, we have offered firearm safety, archery and rifle range activities, fishing, and most recently we began offering Hunter Safety at Prospect Mountain High School. All of these programs have been offered on an opt-in basis and have been wildly popular with our families.

All our volunteers undergo background checks. For the Hunter Safety program, neither the districts nor our students incurred any cost. New Hampshire Fish and Game receives federal funds derived under the Pittman-Robertson Act to cover all costs associated with this program, and TL Storer donates its staff, facility, and range time. We are confident that other nonprofit camps, gun clubs, and other entities with insured ranges and properly-trained staff would be eager to volunteer as partners to inspire and prepare the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts.

### **Important Elements:**

#### **1. Partnerships**

While schools can offer archery within their Physical Education programs through initiatives like the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP), there are significant barriers (in cost, time, insurance, and law) to bringing firearm ranges onto school campuses. Rather than find funding for those costs and devote staff time to navigating those challenges, we have found it more cost-effective and fastest to work with local partners who already had facilities and system in place to teach archery and other outdoor safety topics.

For Hunter Safety, we partnered with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and the TL Storer Reservation located in Barnstead. I'll talk more about how that works in a moment.

## 2. Elective Credit Policies

Within New Hampshire's required graduation requirements, there is still room for local school boards to award significant elective credit. In New Hampshire, a minimum of 20 credits is required for graduation, but local school boards are allowed to set greater requirements. At Prospect Mountain, a regular diploma requires 24 credits and an Honors diploma requires 26. Typical students take 8 to 10 credits' worth of electives. In recent years, we have expanded access to extended learning credit for work-based experiences, nontraditional Phys Ed activities, and new electives aligned with students' future plans such as careers in Healthcare or Animal Science. We can (and have been exploring)

### Requirements:

Under **N.H. Admin. Code § Fis 1201** and **RSA 214:23-a**, the following criteria must be met for a course to lead to official certification:

- **Minimum Age:** Students must be at least **12 years old** by the last day of the course to receive certification.
- **Certified Instruction:** Every in-person session must have at least **two approved instructors**, including one designated "chief" or "assistant chief" instructor appointed by the NHFG hunter education coordinator.
- **Required Topics:** Instruction must cover firearm and archery safety, hunter ethics, wildlife management, outdoor survival, and New Hampshire game laws.

### How it Works:

#### 1. Fish & Game Curriculum

Public schools and the **New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHFG)** can offer hunter safety courses to high school students.

**Course Structure:** NHFG provides two main formats for schools to utilize:

- **In-Person Course:** Includes **12 to 18 hours** of instruction.
- **Hybrid Course:** A self-paced online curriculum followed by a mandatory **4 to 8-hour field day** for practical assessment.

*We chose the in-person course option, with classroom instruction at Prospect Mountain High School.*

#### 2. TL Storer Facilities

The TL Storer Reservation in Barnstead has archery and rifle ranges, is insured, and has staff trained and certified in the safe operation of those facilities. Similar facilities exist at Scout Camps, Gun Clubs, and Private Ranges all over New Hampshire.

- Students who take the in-person NHFG course spend most of their time in a classroom, and at the end of the course there is one active shooting (live fire) exercise on a rifle range, followed by a written test and a practice test that requires walking through the woods and making several shoot/don't shoot decisions with assessment by a certified instructor (NOTE: this is not a live fire test). Because TL Storer has a heated lodge, expansive wooded land and trails, an insured rifle range, and its own NRA range safety officer, they have been the ideal partner for our schools. In our first Hunter Safety class, the rifle range and outdoor testing components took place on a weekend day at the TL Storer facility.

### 3. School Sponsorship

The high school provides logistics, student registration and facilitating parent/guardian consent and other paperwork requirements. We provide a classroom for the in-person classes so our students, who are already at school, do not have to travel for classes. For our first Hunter Safety class, this fall, we held weekly classes after school.

We are exploring possibilities for other scheduling options and are thinking about "bundling" Hunter Safety or Firearm safety with other topics to create an elective class in outdoor survival, traditions, and conservation ethics. We have not yet found any legislative roadblocks that would prevent the school from offering such a course for credit, provided we can continue to coordinate logistics for the NHFG instructors' participation, the elective course is never made a graduation requirement, and we allow students to opt out of the live fire component of the practical exam at the end of the Hunter Safety portion of the class.

## Federal Framework

- **Funding:** Hunter education programs are largely supported by federal grants from the **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**, funded by excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment under the **Pittman-Robertson Act**.
- **Standards:** Federal law encourages states to provide instruction in firearm safety, wildlife management, ethics, and outdoor survival.

## Other options for Public Schools:

Schools may implement NHFG Hunter Safety courses in the following ways:

- **Integrated Curriculum:** Some NH high schools might offer "Hunter's Safety" as a component of a physical education (PE) elective or an intensive summer course.
- **Collaborative Logistics:** Schools can host the classroom portion while partnering with NHFG or local clubs for the "field day" component, which often includes live-fire exercises and hands-on skill assessments.
  - *This is how Prospect Mountain is offering its Hunter Safety class.*
- **Registration and Parental Consent:** Students under 18 must have a parent or legal guardian sign a course registration card.

For the Alton and Barnstead schools, these efforts have been part of an effort in recent years to make sure we are demonstrating value to our stakeholders. As a result of enrollment decline and increasing educational choice, public schools are facing greater competition from public, charter, private, and homeschool options. In any competitive environment, it is incumbent on every service provider to forge its identity and to be responsive to its constituents' needs. We have found incredible community support for outdoor education in general and for these programs in particular.

Any school district in New Hampshire may offer any of these programs under current law. I understand, however, and the introduction of HB 1830 and HB1122 suggest that there may be a perception that schools are reluctant to do so. Therefore, in addition to providing testimony today, I have also been in contact with the Commissioner's office at the Department of Education, and I will share my written notes with them. Mr. Ellis and I will commit to working with the Commissioner and her staff to answer any questions they may have so the Department might issue guidance to the field on how to create these partnerships and the regulatory framework under which they may exist.