

Good morning, Chairman Porter and Committee-

For the record I am Representative Donna Henderson from District 9B in northeastern North Dakota which includes parts of Cavalier, Towner, and Rolette counties.

I'm here today to introduce House Bill 1377 A bill to allow party hunting for deer in North Dakota. This bill would allow a group of hunters up to ten in number, to work together to fill the legal deer tags of members of the party, as long as all the members have the necessary licenses required by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. This bill does not change the lottery process, it does not change the number of tags the North Dakota Game and fish issues, and does not change the penalties if a deer is harvested without a tag. I believe this bill would actually reduce the number of deer that die from minor gunshot wounds. Sometimes you hit the deer, but it's not a mortal wound. We try hard to track our deer when shot, but sometimes there just isn't enough blood to track and they get away, only to die later and not be found. A back up shooter could help prevent that.

The Game and fish department does a great job in monitoring the deer population in North Dakota and in issuing the correlating number of deer tags available each year, and we believe they are doing the best they can to get deer tags out to the most possible hunters with the deer population numbers we have. This bill is meant in no way to disrespect the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, or hunters in general in North Dakota. We are looking at all the positive aspects of this bill, including more hunters being to be able to participate in deer hunting in North Dakota.

The purpose of this bill is to keep the culture of hunting alive in our state. Back in the good old days, the opening day of deer hunting was pretty much a national holiday! Everybody got a deer tag and we would go out together. Everybody had a tag to fill and we did it as a family. Each shooting their own deer, as we all took turns walking the tree rows and grassy sloughs, or posting in the spot we reasoned was the best place for the deer to run.

All six of our children walked with us before they were eligible for a deer tag, all took hunter safety class and all have gotten youth deer tags as young hunters and some have gotten tags as adults in the deer lottery. They have all learned the art of tracking, hunting, shooting, skinning and gutting and processing their deer- one even has learned taxidermy skills and finished a beautiful buck mount that's on our wall today. There's so much more to deer hunting than just shooting. First they have to pay attention to where the deer are- what habitat will hold them this fall? Looking for the deer trails, deer beds, deer scrapes and deciding which direction we should push the deer this time according to the current wind and trying to guess which group of trees the deer will run to if they get away from us. If one of us did get a shot but wounded the deer, tracking the blood trail is another skill they've learned.

Usually, we have had 3 generations of hunters together with the older teaching the younger ones all these many hunting skills. What a great tradition to keep alive!

But things have changed. Because of the lower deer population, it's now common for either dad or son to get a tag but not both. So, the one with the tag goes to sit alone in a tree stand waiting for their chance for a good shot at a deer. Now that's still OK, but I can't help but think it's not the same deer hunting learning experience that it used to be. Now our family still goes out and those of us with out tags will still get the required licenses and walk to try to scare up deer for the lucky one with the tag waiting in the best posting spot. But in our area, and I would suspect all over North Dakota, there are so many people who simply quit hunting because they haven't gotten a tag for years. And there are those, who after finally drawing a buck tag, realize they don't have hunting buddies to hunt with anymore.

But really the bigger issue here is the second amendment. As the populus loses their interest in hunting, I believe they could easily lose their passion for preserving their right to keep and bear arms. If they stop hunting, and eventually sell that deer rifle they never use, they would have less and less reasons to care about their gun rights, and that thinking would carry on generationally and put the second amendment in jeopardy for all of us in years to come.

So that's the reason behind this bill. To preserve the culture of hunting in our state and thereby helping to protect the second amendment for future generations.

Now this is a relatively easy bill, it says on page 2 that "Any member of a party of 10 or fewer may take or kill the number of deer which is equal to the number of valid deer licenses held by the participating members of the party. Each person in the party must hold a valid combination license to be eligible to party hunt." Now legislative council chose that language, I buy a combination license each year so it looked right to me, but currently the ND Game and Fish requires only a certificate and general game and habitat license.

So to clarify, the bill states that valid deer tags must be held by the participating members of the party. You can't have someone get a tag, and not participate in the hunt. It would be unlawful to fill someone else's tag who is not out in the hunting group. No giving tags to other people to fill, no sitting home on the couch while someone fills your tag, no sitting in the pickup near the hunt- If your tag is being filled, you must participate in the hunt.

Currently I found 2 other states that have some type of party or group hunting with different restrictions: one defines it as a group of 2 or more persons maintaining unaided visual and vocal contact with each other, another one allows party hunting but exclude youth season, bow season, and muzzleloader season. Each State is unique as far as deer population, habitat, and hunting privileges go. I only present this to let you know this is not a totally new idea, but one modified to fit each state that implements it. I would hope you would consider this idea that I have brought forward. I have proposed this basic idea of party hunting or group hunting. Your committee could take this basic idea and tailor it to suit our State if you choose.

I'm sure there will be those testifying after me with lots of their reasons not to pass this bill—but keep in mind, please balance those reasons with the importance of keeping our hunting culture and our 2nd amendment rights alive in ND which is the reasoning behind this bill.

The North Dakota Tourism department recently had their hunting poster on display in the great hall. They State that North Dakota is the place for making hunting memories. I couldn't agree more and that's certainly been true for my family. In this age when too many of our youth are content to just be on their phones, lets encourage them to get out into the great outdoors instead.

Please consider a do pass on HB 1377.

Thank you, Chairman Porter and committee.