

Chairman Patten and members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Brent Schwan. I am a former game warden with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. In 2009 I was the one who proposed to Roger Rostvet, then Deputy Director of The Game and Fish Department, that we allow 12- and 13-year olds to get whitetail doe licenses for use during the youth deer season so long as they were accompanied by a responsible adult who did not have a weapon. Ultimately, the Department found sponsors and the legislation was introduced and passed.

When I made this proposal to the Department it was for a variety of reasons. At the time, we had a youth deer season that allowed individuals that were 14 and 15 years old to get a one-time youth deer license whereby they could shoot a buck or a doe. There was pressure to allow youth younger than 14 to participate in that season. Also at the time, we had an over population of whitetail does throughout the state. Almost everyone in the State wants to shoot bucks, however, managing doe populations is really how the Department manages deer populations and its importance is often overlooked. I felt this was an excellent opportunity to get these younger kids involved in deer hunting and teach them that harvesting does is a good thing. I also felt it was important though that it was done in a very controlled and personal way, thus the requirement to be accompanied by an unarmed adult. It allowed these youth to have two seasons of mentored hunting under their belts before they were put in a position where they may be hunting during the regular firearms season. I still feel this is extremely important. The regular rifle season is very much a social event in North Dakota, and that's great except when you have young first-time hunters involved. That creates a lot of pressure for those kids and often times puts them in hectic situations with deer drives, animals moving, people moving, etc. It can be a bit overwhelming. Not in every case, but in many cases, it will remove the mentorship element from the hunt and that's what youth hunting should be all about. I know some people claim the youth season requirement is a time issue. If it's really important to you to teach your child the correct way to hunt and spend time with them in the field, you will find a way to take them out. If it's really not that important to you, you'll find an excuse not to go.

I want to stress that I certainly am not anti-youth hunting. I support 100% the opportunity for these youth to hunt or I wouldn't have suggested this season in the first place. I still believe 100% that this should be a youth season only license and that these youth should be accompanied by and mentored by a responsible adult.

I would be in favor of this amendment if the "accompanied" definition was more stringent than it currently is. The current meaning of "to stay within a distance that permits uninterrupted visual contact and unaided verbal communication" is too vague even though I know that's how most other states define it as well but more importantly it leaves out the requirement that the mentor be unarmed. I think this is crucial to the initial intent of this youth season and in the end will lead to a better experience for the child and the mentor.

I urge you to either defeat this bill and maintain the original intent of the legislation or to at least amend it to require a non-hunting mentor to accompany the youth hunters during the regular gun season as well.