

April 13, 2015

Colorado General Assembly
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources & Energy
200 E. Colfax
Denver, CO 80203

RE: Senate Bill 226 – Concerning the Education Requirements Necessary to Qualify for a License to Take Wildlife

Position: Support

Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources & Energy:

The undersigned organizations, representing numerous Colorado sportsmen and women as well as non-resident hunters who travel to your state to enjoy its abundant wildlife resources, write today to express support for Senate Bill 226, legislation that allows the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission to expand access to hunting opportunity.

Although Colorado currently has nationally recognized hunter education and recruitment programs, participation in the sport has gradually declined over the last several decades. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, there are 44,000 fewer Coloradans participating in the sport now than there were in 1991 despite the fact that the state's population has increased by nearly 1.9 million residents during this same period.

This trend is concerning for several reasons. As it currently stands, the Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife's (CPW) Wildlife Operations budget is derived primarily from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and dedicated federal funds through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) Programs. With WSFR revenue being generated through excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, archery equipment, fishing tackle, rods, reels and motor boat fuel and license dollars being provided directly by hunters and anglers, sportsmen and women proudly shoulder the burden of providing the resources necessary for Colorado Parks and Wildlife to carry out its mission.

However, the availability of these state and federal funding sources is directly tied to participation in hunting, fishing and the shooting sports. Should declining participation trends continue, the long-term viability of managing the state's fish and wildlife resources for the benefit of all Coloradans would be in jeopardy. Furthermore, an unnecessary decline in hunting participation is a threat to Colorado's rich outdoor heritage, a cultural resource that has benefited the state since its founding.

Senate Bill 226 seeks to address these concerns by making improvements to Colorado's hunter education program that will allow CPW to more effectively recruit new hunters and increase participation in a safe and responsible manner. This effort, known nationally as Families Afield, seeks to expand hunting opportunities to ensure the next generation of American hunters joins our ranks.

A primary component of Senate Bill 226 would allow hunters ten years of age and older to obtain an apprentice hunting license that provides a one-time waiver of the hunter education requirement so long as the purchaser obtains a proper hunting license and is accompanied by a certified mentor who is at least 18 years old. This “Try Before You Buy” approach is the hallmark of Families Afield and has been adopted in 36 states throughout the nation. Apprentice hunting allows outdoor mentors to instill safety, ethics, and their passion for hunting in new hunters without requiring them to spend significant time in a hunter education course before a prospective hunter has had a chance to try the sport.

While apprentice hunting programs have proven to be extremely successful in recruiting new hunters, we occasionally hear concerns about safety from concerned individuals. Fortunately, with 36 states now featuring apprentice hunting programs, and more than 1.4 million participants, the data is clear—apprentice hunting is extremely safe. In fact, apprentice hunters are more than 5-times safer than the general hunting population. Simply stated, since the adoption of the Families Afield programs, apprentice hunters have proven to be *the safest* hunters in the field.

In addition to providing the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission with the authority to establish an apprentice hunting program, Senate Bill 226 also contains provisions that would address other significant barriers to participation for veterans, resident and non-resident hunters. These proposals represent a holistic approach to expanding opportunities for CPW to reach new constituencies in a way that benefits Colorado’s public wildlife resources, local communities and cultural heritage.

With these factors in mind, we urge the Committee to support Senate Bill 226.

Sincerely,

Colorado Outfitters Association
Colorado Trappers Association
Colorado Wildlife Federation
Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation
Ducks Unlimited
National Rifle Association
National Shooting Sports Foundation
National Wild Turkey Federation
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance

cc: Senator Bill Cadman, President of the Senate
Senator Mark Scheffel, Senate Majority Leader
Senator Morgan Carroll, Senate Minority Leader
Bob Broscheid, Director, Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission