

Regulation Proposals

2026-27 and 2027-28 Hunting Seasons



Maryland Department of Natural Resources

Wildlife and Heritage Service

Regulatory Process

- ✓ The Game Program meets and develops Management Concepts.
 - August 21, 2025
- ✓ Presents Management Concepts to Wildlife Advisory Committee.
 - October 15, 2025
- ✓ Presents Concepts to a meeting of Internal Stakeholders.
 - December 10, 2025
- ✓ Presents Concepts to a meeting of External Stakeholders.
 - January 14, 2026
-  ✓ Concepts are refined further and developed into Proposals and are placed online for public comment.
 - February 2026
- ✓ Comment period closes and Proposals are finalized and presented to the Wildlife Advisory Commission for a final vote.
 - March 18, 2026
- ✓ Final Proposals are forwarded to the Maryland Register for additional comment and regulations become final.

**REVIEW INPUT AND ADD/DROP/MODIFY
AT EVERY STEP**

River Otter

Regulation Proposal

Align the otter bag limit in both non-coastal zones. The bag limit would be two otters per day (total of two per season) for Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, Howard, Montgomery, and Washington counties combined.

Rationale/Goal: Aligning the bag limits in the non-coastal zones would simplify bag limit restrictions for trappers and only increase the daily and season bag limit in Allegany and Garrett counties by one. Current trapping participation levels make population harm a non-concern.

Comments: Otter populations are robust and can support additional harvest.

Fisher and Long-tailed weasel



Regulation Proposal

Align the fisher and long-tailed weasel bag limits and season dates. The bag limit would increase from two fishers to four fishers per season and the season would run from November 1st - February 1st. The long-tailed weasel season and bag limit would mirror fisher.

Rationale/Goal: Long-tailed weasel trapping season currently mirrors that of coyote, a species they share little in common with. Long-tailed weasel are more similar to fisher and trapping methods for the two species are more similar. Additionally, there is currently no bag limit on long-tailed weasel, despite regional concern for the species. Establishing a bag limit would ensure the protection of the species.

Research has shown that the fisher population in western Maryland is robust enough to sustain additional harvest. Current fisher trapping participation is relatively low. Increased bag limits may increase participation.

Comments: Biologists are somewhat concerned about possible declines in long-tailed weasel population numbers. This would be the first step towards a better understanding of how the species is faring in Maryland. Research from a 2020 study in western Maryland showed the fisher population is more robust than previously believed. With the few trappers that focus on fisher, an increase in overall harvest is predicted to be minimal.

Gray Fox

Regulation Proposal

Create an electronic check-in process for gray fox similar to current requirements for deer and turkeys. All trappers and hunters who harvest a gray fox between November 1st and February 28th would be required to check in their harvest electronically using the current MD Outdoors system. This regulatory change would have a 5-year sunset provision.

Rationale/Goal: Gray fox are suspected to be in decline across their range. Electronic check-in of harvested animals would help to supplement current harvest monitoring mechanisms. Other states have implemented an electronic check-in process for gray fox for similar reasons.

Comments: This regulation change would assist the department with updating current county location records for gray fox. Currently, it is assumed gray fox inhabit all areas of the state, but records are sparse for parts of the eastern shore.

Sika Deer

Regulation Proposal

Institute an antler point restriction (APR) for sika deer requiring stags to have at least two points on one antler to be legal for harvest. Hunters would be allowed to harvest one antlered sika deer within the yearly bag limit that does not meet that requirement. Stags could be taken in any order.

Rationale/Goal: Further align sika deer management with the same quality deer management principles used to manage white-tailed deer. The APR would promote the harvest of mature sika deer, improving the age structure of the population. Additionally, an APR would promote an increased antlerless harvest, improving overall herd management.

Comments: Annually, approximately 24% of the antlered harvest is spikes (yearlings).

Deer

Regulation Proposal

Allow the use of straight-walled cartridge rifles during the muzzleloader seasons for those hunters with a Universal Disability Pass that are hunting from a vehicle.

Rationale/Goal: Improve safety and hunting opportunities for disabled hunters.

Comments: Loading a muzzleloader can be difficult and dangerous in a vehicle. Allowing straight walled cartridge rifles is safer and may attract more disabled hunters to participate in the season.

Deer & Black Bear

Regulation Proposal

Modify the current energy requirements for rifles allowed for hunting deer and black bear. Any centerfire or rimfire rifle .30 caliber (7.62mm) or larger would be legal for hunting these species with no minimum muzzle energy requirement. Rifles smaller than .30 caliber (7.62mm) used for black bear and deer would still be required to generate 1,200 foot pounds of muzzle energy.

Rationale/Goal: The current regulation excludes many popular pistol rounds used in rifles that are capable of ethically harvesting big game. This change would legalize and expand the use of popular modern hunting rifles that are commonly used in other states that do not currently meet the muzzle energy requirement. Additionally, this change increases the rifle options for youth, senior, and disabled hunters who may be restricted due to recoil.

Comments: Adding .30 caliber as a minimum caliber as an alternative to 1,200 foot pounds of energy permits the use of popular and effective firearms that otherwise cannot meet the muzzle energy requirements.

Black Bear

Management Proposal (policy change)

Adopt an infinite grace period for black bear lottery preference points.

Rationale/Goal: Common request from hunters. Currently, if a hunter misses a single year, they lose all of their preference points. This has caused frustration amongst resident and non-resident hunters. Implementing a grace period will improve hunter retention, hunter relations, and reduce confusion surrounding the lottery process.

Note: This is a policy change, but public comment is requested.

Drones

Regulation Proposal

Establish regulations for the approved use of small unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) while hunting. Regulations would prohibit the use of a drone to locate, drive, or herd wildlife for the purpose of hunting, trapping, or killing EXCEPT they could be used to aid in the recovery of a wounded or expired animal. Drone operators would be required to notify Natural Resources Police before and after using a drone to search for a wounded or expired animal.

Rationale/Goal: Currently, there are no restrictions for drone use. This regulation would promote fair chase hunting and align more closely with other states.

Comments: Based on anecdotal reports from hunters, outfitters, and the general public, it is known that drones are being used to locate wildlife for potential harvest. This is of concern due to the impacts it may have on game species. The use of drones calls into question fair chase. Locating roosting turkeys, deer in cover, or waterfowl on resting grounds are among the major concerns. It is recognized that the use of thermal imaging drones can greatly assist with locating wounded or expired game that has left the sight of the hunter. Many states, including Virginia and West Virginia, have regulations in place prohibiting the use of drones while hunting. This would align our regulations with those of neighboring states. Exceptions would be built in for research and management purposes not meeting the definition of hunting.

Thank You

**We encourage you to provide comments
via the online comment forum**

**Comments can also be provided by
phone at 410-260-8540; by fax to 410-260-
8596; or in writing to: Maryland
Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife
and Heritage Service, 580 Taylor Avenue,
E-1, Annapolis, Maryland, 21401**