EXHIBIT 35
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HB 600

House Bill 600
February 17, 2005
Presented by Jeff Hagener
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Jeff Hagener, Director for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

I appear in support of HB 600 which allows first-time hunters who are 16 years of age or older to be deferred from hunter education for one license year. This bill provides the opportunity for novice hunters to hunt with an experienced hunter without having to take hunter education first.

The demographics of Montana are changing. Young people who do not grow up in traditional hunting families are less likely to become hunters. They lack the exposure to hunting which is critical to developing an interest in hunting and hunter education. FWP is interested in reducing barriers to this group.

Research has shown that as people mature their interest in hunting and attending hunter education classes fades. Often hunting loses out because of other interests and associated time commitments. Yet, when given an opportunity to hunt with an experienced hunter, youngsters have shown they are good candidates to become active participants. Current law does not allow for this opportunity. HB 600 creates a new opportunity for those who have not participated in hunter education at an earlier age.

Hunter education ensures that participants have the proper knowledge and skills to be safe and responsible hunters. HB 600 waives this training requirement in exchange for mentorship by adult, experienced hunters. A recent report by the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance shows that young hunters supervised by an adult mentor have one of the lowest injury rates of all hunters. The presence of a responsible and attentive adult hunter is an important factor affecting youth hunting safety.

Since the deferral option is not available to a person younger than 16 years of age, we do not feel it would create an incentive for those 11 and 12 years old, which comprise the bulk of FWP's current participants, to delay taking hunter education.

Many states and provinces are currently developing new programs to encourage hunter participation. FWP believes that HB 600 is an innovative and attractive alternative to the growing number of Montanans whose background is different from what it has been traditionally. HB 600 opens up a new path to becoming a hunter without comprising the core values and honorable tradition of hunter education in Montana.