SENATE NATURAL RESOURCES
EXHIBIT NO. 1
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BILL NO. HB171

House Bill 171
March 8, 2007
Presented by Chris Smith
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

I appear in support of HB 171 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 older novice hunters to hunt with an experienced hunter without having to take hunter education first.

The demographics of Montana are changing. 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.

As people mature their interest in hunting and attending hunter education classes fades and attending a class with younger participants creates a social barrier. Often hunting loses out because of other interests and associated time commitments. Yet, when given an opportunity to hunt with an experienced hunter, they have shown to be good candidates to become active participants. Current law does not allow for this opportunity. HB 171 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. HB 171 waives this training requirement for one year in exchange for mentorship by adult, experienced hunters. A recent report by the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance shows that 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 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. It would, however, provide an additional path to older individuals.

Many states and provinces are currently developing new programs to encourage hunter participation. FWP believes that HB 171 is an innovative and attractive alternative to the growing number of Montanans whose background is different from what it has been traditionally.