

House Bill 613
March 15, 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 Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I appear in support of HB 613 with the sponsor's amendment.

Research shows us that exposure to activities, like hunting, at an early age is a significant factor in developing a lasting interest in the activity. In today's society, there are a myriad of activities competing for the time and attention of our youth; both traditional, like hunting and fishing and modern, like video games and iPods. Given the importance of hunting to Montana's culture, heritage and resource management, it is important to provide opportunities for youth to experience hunting in ways that will embed lifelong values related to hunting.

Many Montana youth are exposed to hunting before age 12, when they can obtain their own licenses, by accompanying older family members. This participation as an observer helps create a lifetime interest in hunting. Allowing Montana's parents to decide if their youngster is mature enough to experience the full spectrum of hunting would enable some families to take the next step in building future generations of hunters.

Under current law, youth below 12 years of age can legally hunt non-game animals, such as rabbits, or predators, such as coyotes, and can shoot gophers or prairie dogs. At age 12, youth who complete a hunter safety instruction course can obtain any hunting license offered by the state and can take all classified game. It is important to note that all youth below 14 years old must be accompanied by a parent or guardian or other adult to carry and use a firearm in public (see 45-8-344, MCA).

HB 613 provides the opportunity for youth aged 9, 10 or 11 to experience hunting of some game animals: upland birds, waterfowl, turkeys and antlerless deer. This is a good mix of animals, yet precludes a number of enforcement issues that could arise if youth could hunt the full range of game animals.

As drafted, HB 613 would exempt youth from taking hunter safety instruction. FWP believes that hunter education is important to Montana's excellent track record of safe hunting. We have worked with the sponsor to develop a simple amend to the bill, striking the word "not" from line 21 and deleting section 2. With these changes, all Montana youth would be required to take hunter education before heading afield.

Many states and provinces are currently developing new programs to encourage hunter participation. FWP believes that HB 613 provides an avenue for getting kids involved in the outdoors at an early age and supports passage of the bill with the proposed amendments.