

North American Muzzleloader Hunting Association

Fighting For The Rights And Hunting Opportunities Of Today's Muzzleloading Hunters

Wisconsin Muzzleloading Hunters Vote "Yes" To Allow Magnifying Scopes During The Muzzleloader Deer Season

On Monday, April 13th, thousands of Wisconsin sportsmen attended the 2009 Conservation Congress meetings conducted in all counties of the state. These annual meetings are held to give hunters and fishermen an opportunity to vote on regulation and season changes. This year, one of the more closely watched issues on the ballot was whether or not to allow the use of magnifying riflescopes during the 10-day muzzleloader deer season. And Wisconsin sportsmen have spoken, voting "yes" to allow hunters to use a precision telescopic rifle sight during the muzzleloader only deer hunt.

When the votes had been tallied, 62 counties approved the regulation change, while only 9 counties rejected the change. And in the one remaining county, the vote was tied.

Wisconsin's first muzzleloader deer season was held in 1992, and riflescopes have never been allowed during this post general firearms hunt. While 37 states permitted the use of a magnifying scope during the 2008 muzzleloader seasons, Wisconsin and 11 other states continued to deny hunters the right to choose whether to use a sight system that allowed them to better see their target and place their shots, or to stick with non-magnifying sights that added to the challenge of the hunt. And it has been that denied right of choice which lead to a federal discrimination complaint filed against 15 state wildlife agencies, including the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, back in July 2006 by the North American Muzzleloader Hunting Association. **(Montana is the only state in the country that still denies muzzleloading hunters an opportunity to enjoy their own season.)**

Shortly after that complaint was filed, scopes were legalized in Georgia. And last year, the wildlife agencies in Nebraska and Kansas acknowledged that hunters were becoming an older lot - with a growing percentage needing the use of such sights in order to participate in the special muzzleloader only seasons. That same realization may have spurred passage for a regulation change in Wisconsin, that will allow those with less than perfect eyesight to now take part in the muzzleloader deer season.

Today, sportsmen over the age of 40 make up the largest age class of hunters, and this is the group of hunters who tend to suffer from the loss of close up focus, plus the inability of aging eyes to switch focus back and forth rapidly enough to permit a rear sight, front sight and a deer at 50 or 75 yards to be somewhat in focus at the same time. Not only do these hunters need the use of a magnifying riflescope in order to precisely

place their shots for a quick and humane harvest of deer, but to also positively identify the target as a deer and not another human.

Participation in the Wisconsin muzzleloader season has been lacking, specifically due to the regulation that prohibited the use of a riflescope. The deer harvest during this season the past two years has only been about 10,000 deer each year. The low number of deer taken has done little to contribute to managing the growing deer herd. Now that sportsmen have voted down the restriction that has kept many deer hunters from hunting the muzzleloader season, participation is expected to increase.

Unfortunately, two other muzzleloader issues on the 2009 Wisconsin Conservation Congress ballot failed to get hunter approval. Either would have set the muzzleloader season back several weeks, to give the deer a break. The current 10-day muzzleloader season follows right on the heels of the 9-day modern firearm deer season. One proposal would have seen a 10-day muzzleloader season begin on December 22nd and run until December 31. The other proposal would have established a longer 16-day muzzleloader season, that would have opened on the Saturday before Christmas, and run through until the Sunday following New Years Day. Either way, the season would have included the Christmas holiday season, and would have given school age hunters a season they could have fully enjoyed thanks to the time away from school.

Now that sportsmen have said they want change and the elimination of the unpopular restriction of magnifying scopes during the muzzleloader season, it will be interesting to see how long the Wisconsin DNR drags its feet before implementing the change. Most Wisconsin muzzleloading hunters who have contacted the North American Muzzleloader Hunting Association have voiced an opinion that it won't be in place until the 2010 season. - Toby Bridges, North American Muzzleloader Hunting Association