January 6, 2022

The Honorable Rebecca Rausch, Chair
Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
State House, Room 218
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Carolyn Dykema, Chair
Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
State House, Room 473F
Boston, MA 02133

Re: S.546, *An Act to Reimburse the Inland Fisheries and Game Fund*

Dear Chair Rausch, Chair Dykema, and Members of the Environment Committee,

Our organizations respectfully offer testimony in support of S.546, *An Act to Reimburse the Inland Fisheries and Game Fund*, sponsored by Senator Anne Gobi. We are united by a commitment to conserve and restore the Commonwealth's most critical natural resources, and we regularly work closely with the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) to protect and restore rare, threatened, and endangered species across Massachusetts.

MassWildlife is primarily funded through the sale of hunting, freshwater fishing, and trapping licenses, permits, and stamps, as well as dedicated federal funds from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration program.[1] A small remainder of MassWildlife's annual budget comes from bond-funded initiatives, donations, and funds from the state's annual operating budget. Unlike other state agencies, MassWildlife receives only a small percentage of its operational budget from general funds. All funds from freshwater fishing, hunting, and trapping licenses and dedicated federal funds go directly into the Inland Fish and Game Fund (hereafter, the Fund), which can only be used for administering programs by MassWildlife.

Despite a variety of funding sources that support MassWildlife's work, the agency is chronically underfunded. Wildlife and habitat have always faced threats from development, fragmentation, pollution, and invasive species, and now climate change is heavily impacting ecosystems and natural areas, making MassWildlife's work more important than ever.

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[1] MassWildlife Funding, 2021. https://www.mass.gov/info-details/masswildlife-funding

Currently, the state reimburses the Fund for the loss in revenue from discounted hunting and fishing licenses offered to residents ages 65-69.[2] However, the state does not reimburse the loss of revenue associated with free licenses offered to residents over age 70, which was approximately $1 million per year[3] prior to the fee increase approved in 2021. Between 2022 and 2026, license fees will essentially double,[4] meaning that by 2026, MassWildlife could be losing nearly $2 million in annual revenue if the status quo is to continue.

S.546 would annually reimburse the Inland Fisheries and Game Fund for all loss of revenue for any fishing or hunting license provided at a discount and for any license provided free of charge. This language would create consistency and require the state to reimburse MassWildlife for loss in revenue resulting from issuing free and reduced licenses – helping to restore taxpayer-supported funds to conserve and manage critical fish and wildlife habitat and plant species. Reimbursing these funds, as well as a more generous allocation from the General Fund, is part of the broader need to diversify funding for MassWildlife programs, which has been identified through MassWildlife's assessment of fee increases.[5]

We are grateful to the Legislature for adopting Senator Gobi's amendment to the FY22 Operating Budget to reimburse the Fund for lost revenue attributed to the issuance of discounted or free hunting and fishing licenses. However, this language is included in a line item (2300-0100), rather than amending Section 11 of Chapter 131 of the Massachusetts General Laws, which governs the licenses and fees associated with the Inland Fisheries and Game Fund. We respectfully request that the Legislature make permanent the forward-thinking reimbursement they included in the FY22 budget by passing S.546, and therefore, updating Chapter 131.

The work of MassWildlife benefits all citizens of Massachusetts. MassWildlife's Wildlife Management Areas and Wildlife Conservation Easements provide places for recreation and meditation; healthy ecosystems that ensure we have clean air and water and that sequester and store carbon; well-managed habitats that support our most imperiled species; and educational programs that inspire residents of all ages. The challenges of climate change and habitat degradation have made the work of MassWildlife critically urgent.

Thank you for your time and consideration of S.546. We respectfully request that you swiftly provide a favorable report on this important legislation. Please feel free to contact us should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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[2] Per Chapter 983 of the Acts of 1977.
https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/bitstream/handle/2452/29286/1977acts0983.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y
[3] Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife 2019 Annual Report, page 155. https://www.mass.gov/doc/2019-masswildlife-annual-report/download
[4] MassWildlife Fee Increase Schedule 2022-2026. https://www.mass.gov/doc/masswildlife-fee-schedule-2022-2026/download
[5] See https://www.mass.gov/info-details/masswildlife-funding

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cc: The Honorable Anne Gobi