

# HUNTER SAFETY TRAINING IN THE FEDERAL AID IN WILDLIFE RESTORATION PROGRAM, WITH SPECIAL REFERANCE TO MANDATORY REQUIREMENTS

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Like many other activities carried out by State fish and game departments, hunter safety programs began to expand and became a significant activity only after World War II. The late 1940's and early '50's saw substantial increases in numbers of hunters, hunter participation, and overall expansion of State fish and game department programs and budgets. Several States got into hunter safety training in those early years, others are just now beginning.

Lack of adequate funding has always been, and likely always will be, a major problem in fish and game management. This problem has been met in part, at least, by passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act in 1937 and the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act in 1950. These laws ear-marked existing excise tax revenues for allocation to the States, to fund fish and wildlife management programs on a cost sharing basis. The programs have been eminently successful for they provide dependable funding which permits continuity of activities, establishment of competent staffs, and requirements for quality performance.

It was not until 1970, however, that provision for hunter safety training was made in the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program. The Act was amended by Public Law 91-503, passed October 23, 1970, to provide that half of the revenue from any tax imposed on handguns shall be apportioned to the States on the basis of population, and that this money may be used to pay up to 75% of the costs of a hunter safety program.

Note that the Act says these funds may be spent on hunter safety programs. If any State chooses to do so, the money may be spent on regular wildlife restoration activities. Because these funds are available to either regular P-R activities or to hunter safety activities, as each State may decide, it is extremely important that all Federal Aid project funding be closely coordinated to insure full use of available money and to avoid reversions of funds. Hunter safety training carried out with Federal Aid funds are subject to the same general requirements, standards, and procedures as any other P-R project. These are described in the Federal Aid Manual. In addition, efforts have been made at both the national and regional level to provide program guidelines and standards. Following are some regional guidelines which may be used at least on an interim basis:

## 1. Objectives

- A. A hunter safety project should have clear, well-defined, measurable objectives which are capable of attainment. Such objectives must fall within the purpose of the program as stated in the Federal Aid Manual:
  1. to enhance the safety and well being of firearm users, as well as all citizens, and
  2. to reduce all types of accidents associated with hunting.

- B. These project objectives should be based on identified needs. The problem areas, such as types of accidents, age classes or other grouping of people involved in most firearm and hunting accidents, should be determined. This can be based on an existing, adequate information system or on a special survey using a valid sampling procedure.

## II. Procedures

Procedures must be aimed directly at satisfying the stated project objective(s). For example, if information shows that teen-age hunters are a high accident group, a project *objective* might be to familiarize this age group with firearms and to teach safe gun handling. A *procedure* might be to set up and conduct suitable classes in a specific number of schools. It is important to distinguish between project objectives and procedures in preparing documents.

## III. Standards

### A. Course Duration and Coverage

We feel that any course should provide a minimum of four to six hours of classroom instructions and practice in basic subject matter (firearms and gun safety) with whatever additional time is appropriate for the approvable incidental subjects (survival techniques, first aid, sporting ethics, basic principles of wildlife management, and proper use of archery equipment).

### B. Live Firing

We strongly urge that handling of guns and live firing be a part of all courses. If firearm use is not possible, air guns are next best. If live firing is not a part of the course, target range construction cannot be justified since all range construction must be an integral part of the statewide hunter safety program.

### C. Instructors

Instructors must have experience in firearms and gun handling. Based on personal interview and oral testing, instructors should demonstrate a sincere interest in teaching firearm safety and the ability to communicate with all age groups.

At present, eleven of the States in this Region have hunter safety programs. Eight operate with Federal Aid funds. All of these programs are somewhat different from each other, but all are similar in one respect — none involve mandatory training. Since a number of States in other regions do require hunter safety training as a prerequisite to purchase of a hunting license, let us consider some of the pros and cons of mandatory programs.

In 1949 the New York State Legislature enacted a law requiring youngsters under 16 years of age to receive firearms safety training as a prerequisite to purchase their first hunting license. Since 1949 numerous other States have enacted similar legislation, of which 16 now have mandatory State programs, and 25 have voluntary programs. The remaining 9 States are in various stages of enacting hunter safety training courses.

The 1949 New York State legislation quickly brought into sharp focus the many varied problems that a State Game and Fish agency can be confronted with under a mandatory training system. Indeed, the demand quickly became a burden that the State could not readily handle and the services of the National Rifle Association were called upon. In 1950 the NRA was officially designated as the agency to provide instruction and to issue certificates of competence in New York.

A great deal can be learned from the mistakes and the successes of the New York program, as well as similar programs in other States. After 23 years, what

are the pros and cons of a mandatory program—is it really worth all the extra effort and money? I certainly cannot answer that question directly with a yes or no, but I would like to present the merits of such a program. I will follow with the other side of the coin—the problems and disadvantages of a mandatory system.

First, and perhaps foremost on the favorable side is the fact that you will reach all the young people who are at least vaguely interested in hunting. This is, of course, a wonderful opportunity for a State Game and Fish Agency to reach a vast number of people who will in a few years make up the majority of your bread and butter clientele. Young people also generally constitute an age group where firearms accidents are high, especially when their parents are non-hunters. As more young people are safety trained, they in turn can serve to force their parents and other adults to conform to hunter safety rules.

In addition to pure and simple hunter safety instruction, the chance to teach the basics of survival, wildlife management, wildlife conservation laws, etc., is of extreme importance. With a shift to urban living, many youngsters today have at best only a vague concept of the biological principles that govern wild animal populations, and many are totally ignorant of most game laws.

Of basic importance, of course, is the result that a mandatory program should bring about—a reduction in hunting-related firearms accidents. In most every State this has been the case despite a corresponding increase in license sales. For example, a 14-year survey in New Jersey shows that annual deaths from hunting have been cut in half since institution of a mandatory safety course for juvenile hunters.

A side light advantage to a mandatory hunter safety system is the increased number of safety-conscious female hunters which has obvious advantages to all concerned. Of particular importance is the chance for a safety-trained girl to educate and attempt to alter the attitude of female friends who by and large tend to take a dim view of hunters and hunting.

Because more states are requiring hunter safety training for both residents and non-residents, an obvious advantage to a mandatory program is the reciprocity that may be enjoyed by trained hunters in other states.

The disadvantages of a mandatory program are fairly evident. First and foremost, it puts a great strain on volunteer instructors, and on resources of the State agency. Instructors who at one time used informative and interest-holding training aids will probably find less and less time for such “extras”. While this is a serious drawback, it can be corrected by enlarging the instructor work force and by holding class size to about 15 or so per instructor.

Class room space and firing range facilities must be made available in every municipality or school district. Even then, however, the gripes will come that “you make it mandatory but I cannot get my boy certified and I promised to take him hunting—tomorrow!” or “How come there is no class in *my* neighborhood?” etc.

As I mentioned earlier, a mandatory program places a real burden of responsibility on the instructors. No longer will they be the small, elite group who work with children and pass on their knowledge of guns and love of hunting. Now they have a *job* to do. Consequently, these instructors may tend to get a little careless because they get rushed. Names are misspelled, addresses left out or are incorrect. Worse yet, little Johnny is forgotten on the roster. After all, volunteer instructors are great people, but they are human and under the added pressures you may wind up with hurt feelings, resignations, etc. — in other words, a mandatory program invites “people problems”.

The participants in a mandatory program of hunter safety training will come from a real variety of backgrounds, some of whom will reflect bad learning attitudes developed in grade school or high school. Many will lack an eagerness to learn, and some will think they already know it all. To capture and hold the interest and attention of these students will absolutely require the use of excellent training techniques and materials.

This brings us to costs. Modern training aids and the possible use of salaried instructors, support staff, and record storing equipment will require the expenditure of additional funds for a mandatory program. Count also on increases in per diem and transportation expenses.

Administrative problems can be a real headache if the mandatory program is not well thought out. It would be wise to observe your State motor vehicle drivers' license system to foresee potential problem areas. The number one concern will be for a rapid and efficient record storage-retrieval system, probably in a central location to serve statewide needs. Hand processing 5,000-15,000 applications, certificates, and awards a year can be tricky. When you start handling 20,000 students and more a year, you should seriously consider going to automatic data processing.

What happens when a young hunter loses his wallet and certification the day before hunting season? Would a licenses seller in West Tennessee have some means of determining if this youngster has successfully passed the hunter safety course? These are just examples of what you can expect, and the public has the right to expect quick solutions with a very minimum of inconvenience to them. As I mentioned earlier, a sophisticated statewide certification storage-retrieval system is going to cost money.

In conclusion I'd like to stress that whether you have a voluntary or mandatory program, hunter-safety standards of high quality are essential. The risks of high pressure-high volume certifications under a mandatory program must be guarded against. Only through a quality program can objectives be met and productive results expected. To help you achieve these results, Federal Aid stands ready to assist in any way possible. Close coordination between your office and the Federal Aid Supervisor and Hunter Safety Coordinator is of the utmost importance.

## **FIREARMS TRAINING AND THE CONSERVATION ENFORCEMENT OFFICER**

*By*

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*Conservation Enforcement Officer II*

The Conservation Enforcement Officer is today faced with a challenge that all law enforcement officers face. This is the growing trend of disrespect and disregard for our laws, law officers and the rights of others. This is a trend that we have seen developing in this country, particularly over the past decade. We have seen several of our major cities torn by violence. Our college campuses have become a place for many of our young people to demonstrate and make demands, and when these demands are not met, these same young people go on burning, pillaging and looting sprees.

We have seen sniping, ambush and outright murder of enforcement officers and other officials. In Alabama approximately nine percent of our Conservation Officers have been shot. Several more officers have been shot at, but luckily were not hit. Our courts seemingly are giving all rights to the criminal and taking away the rights of his victim and the law officer. Public apathy towards the violator seems rampant, yet the public continually demands better law enforcement.

The Conservation Enforcement Officers in Alabama have been called on several times over the past few years to assist other enforcement agencies in quelling disturbances, patrolling strife-torn areas and enforcing curfews. In