



Improving hunter education and increasing public safety

HB 2459 AND SB 6039



Problem:

State law requires anyone born after January 1, 1972, to complete a hunter education course approved by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) before buying his or her first hunting license. The course is free, and the volunteer instructors are unpaid. Each year, about 13,000 students participate across the state, although approximately 15,000 register for courses.

State law allows hunters age 10 and older to receive a one-year deferral from the hunter education requirement, but hunters with a deferral, regardless of their age, must be supervised in the field by an adult who has held a hunting license for the three preceding years.

While successful, the current program has several attributes that could be improved. For example:

- Many hunter education graduates are between 8 and 13 years old, so licensed hunters as young as 8 can go hunting by themselves, without supervision.
- Since instructors are not paid, some of these volunteers have collected donations during class to help cover the cost of course material and other expenses, such as classrooms and shooting range rental fees. This practice is contrary to the department's policies.
- Courses are free of charge, so prospective hunters often register for several classes but attend only one, resulting in multiple empty seats at each course.
- It is difficult and time-intensive for WDFW staff in the field to determine whether hunters who accompany those with deferrals meet the three-year license requirement.

Proposed solution and potential benefits:

WDFW is seeking several clarifications and revisions to the state hunter education law (RCW 77.32.155). The department's proposal would:

- Require that all hunter education students be at least 8 years old.
- Require that a licensed hunter at least 18 years old, who is not hunting under a one-year hunter education deferral, to accompany hunters between the ages of 8 and 14 and hunters of any age who are hunting under a deferral. However, hunters between 8 and 14 could hunt unaccompanied on their family's property, where they would be familiar with the land and unlikely to encounter other hunters.
- Establish fees of up to \$20 per student for all hunter education courses, whether offered in-person or online, and \$10 for duplicate certificates. Those fees would raise an estimated \$272,000 per year for hunter education, based on projected participation of 13,000 fee-paying students and production of 1,200 duplicate certificates.
- Authorize the use of fee revenue to cover (a) administrative costs of internet-based training, (b) stipends for instructors, and (c) instructional costs.

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The proposal would have the following benefits:

- The minimum age limit and the requirement that young hunters be accompanied by older licensed hunters would increase the safety of hunters and non-hunters alike. Making the accompaniment requirement consistent for young hunters and those who have received hunter education deferrals would simplify WDFW enforcement and license administration.
- The course fee would deter students from registering for more than one class and leave space for more students to attend.
- Fee revenue would cover a variety of program costs, including such expenses as range rental and course material.