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Rules change allows deer hunters to use rifles statewide

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Rifles will be allowed statewide for gun deer hunting seasons beginning Nov. 1, according to a Tuesday announcement from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

The rule change had been supported by 58% of the voters at the 2013 spring hearings and approved by the Natural Resources Board.

Wisconsin regulations historically prohibited rifles for deer hunting in parts of the state. The regulations were often delineated along county borders, with most southern and agricultural areas limited to shotgun use.

The popular belief was that shotgun use by hunters in the deer season resulted in fewer shooting incidents. Recent studies have changed the thinking on the relative safety of various firearms.

According to a 2003 DNR survey, about 76% of Wisconsin hunters used a rifle, and 24% used a shotgun as their primary firearm to hunt deer. Data obtained in gun deer seasons from 1998-2008 show 42% of shooting incidents involved shotguns.

The disproportionate number of injuries related to shotgun use had led the DNR to push for easing rifle restrictions. Most of the shooting incidents would have occurred no matter what type of firearm was used, according to the DNR.

Among the areas that prohibited rifle use were all of Ozaukee, Fond du Lac, Sheboygan, Manitowoc and Washington counties and parts of Racine, Kenosha, Dane, Dodge and Waukesha counties.

The rule change will be in place in time for the 2013 gun deer season, which runs Nov. 23-Dec. 1, but not for the Oct. 5-6 youth deer hunt.

Participants in the youth deer hunt must follow the current rules that prohibit rifles in certain parts of the state, including all or part of 20 counties. Check the DNR deer hunting regulation pamphlet for a map or visit the DNR website at dnr.wi.gov.

Hunters should check with local authorities to determine whether ordinances are in place that would restrict the use of rifles in an area they plan to hunt.

State park hunting and trapping: At its Wednesday meeting in Pembine, the Natural Resources Board adopted emergency rules to clarify regulations for hunting and trapping in state parks. The rules prohibit hunting from or shooting across or near trails closed to hunting. They also limit trappers to dog-proof or underwater traps. The state park hunting and trapping seasons, created last year through Act 168, begin Nov. 15. Permanent rules will be developed over the coming year.

Firewood hearings: Current law allows campers on state land to bring in firewood cut within 25 miles of the property, but the threat of the emerald ash borer and other invasive species has the DNR considering a 10-mile maximum. Public hearings will be held at 7 p.m. Oct. 29 in Green Bay, Eau Claire, Wausau and Madison. Written comments can be submitted by Nov. 4 to Andrea.DissTorrance@wisconsin.gov.

Fund created: The NRB formally approved creation of the Cherish Wisconsin Outdoors Fund, an endowment to help protect, restore and improve the state's 1.5 million acres of publicly owned properties. Eligible areas include but are not limited to state wildlife areas, state fishing areas, state parks and state natural areas. The fund will be permanently invested and managed by the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, an independent 501 (c)(3) organization. Visit cherishwisconsin.org to contribute or learn more.

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