

Commentary

WIA trapping compromise needed for respect, safety, and unity

By Kevin Ausland

Gov. Dayton signed into law back in 2012 the Walk-In Access public hunting program. The first sentence of this law established the WIA program with the wording of "excluding trapping" and further in the statute it says, "any use of enrolled lands other than hunting according to this section is prohibited."

There is a current dispute about whether the landowner falls under these exclusions. Regardless, I doubt that our governor, a hunter and dog owner, would have signed his name to this legislation with the knowledge that dogs would be exposed to lethal strangulation traps such as the Conibear-type body grips, kill snares, and tongue-catching pipe traps on these properties leased by the state for public hunting. Furthermore, I am sure legislators who passed this bill took this same wording at face

value and thought WIA hunters would not have to deal with the same misery experienced just months earlier by the death of dogs to body-grip traps as documented by the DNR and reported in the press on other public lands.

Of course, interpretation of any law can vary depending on those who are affected by it. However, ultimately it is the DNR that has final say on the matter (except for potential intervention by the governor or a court). Currently, our DNR has swung completely on the side of some trapping interests and has decided to ignore any public safety concerns regarding the types of traps used on WIA lands. Indeed, the 2011, 2012, and 2013 hunting and trapping handbooks said trapping was prohibited on WIA land with no exceptions. Public contributions to WIA and mandatory WIA fees were

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accepted by the DNR under this no-trapping premise. Now, in the 2014 handbook, there is a complete reversal of this previously printed DNR policy and allows the landowner and anyone he gives permission to, to trap these lands and by nearly any method.

The DNR created WIA landowner lease agreements having a clause that states the landowner shall "assure that any use of the WIA site does not impede public hunting on the WIA site." However, the DNR has chosen not to enforce this clause when clearly a dog caught in a complicated lethal trap and the ensuing hunter's desperation and time involved in trying to remove it surely impedes the hunting process. Consequently, we now have an "anything goes" trapping policy by the DNR that potentially makes WIA lands the most dangerous public hunting areas in the state for dogs, hunters, and their children.

The DNR is allowing any type of trapping on WIAs that would normally take place by any private landowner (whether enrolled in the WIA program or not). This means the 7- by 7-inch jaws of a 220 Conibear trap can be in open trail sets with no need for a box or other enclosure as required on our public hunting lands such as wildlife management areas and waterfowl production areas. Likewise, while snares on WMAs and WPAs need to have their loops half submerged in water, this will be unnecessary on our WIA lands.

This would be a disaster for any pheasant or duck hunter and his four-legged companions. Now, even snares are often the kill variety that can't be loosened.

Another danger to our hunting dogs is the misnamed "dog-proof" trap. This is a 4-inch-long steel pipe with a 1¼-inch diameter with an ingenious thick piano-wire snare built into it. It is a raccoon handcuff-type trap that snares the wrist of the raccoon when it reaches into the tube for a smelly bait. Some models have pull-up triggers and others have push-down, but no matter, since a determined dog will get caught in either.

The pipe keeps an animal from biting off the bottom part of its foot and escaping, so it's ideal for raccoon trapping. Unfortunately, the tube is just wide enough for a dog to stick its tongue down inside. This wire snare will cinch up on the dog's tongue, compressing it to the thickness of a thin stick of chewing gum as it's pulled against the inner wall of the pipe.

A co-director of the Minnesota Trappers Association shared in a seminar at the 2014 Minnesota Pheasants Forever State Convention how he had caught a dog in such a "dog-proof" trap and it expired. This same trapper stated that he uses snares on WIA lands.

In the Sept. 20 commentary written by Tim Spreck, president of the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Alliance, he brought up a number of matters, including landowner rights, predator control, and need for unity among sportsmen. My group, Sportsmen Take Action, is not against any of these. We are not anti-trapping. Instead, we are trying to protect our dogs and the safety of hunters and their children from lethal traps that have no place on program lands designed for public hunting and leased from a landowner with that intention.

MOHA and a few trapping interests are asking the small-game hunters of Minnesota who use WIAs to make the choice between the death or serious injury to our family members – our dogs – over what really boils down to the economic interest of a few that prioritizes a \$20 raccoon or \$30 coyote pelt over a risk to public safety.

On this matter STA will not waiver, but in the spirit of unity and respect for those who trap, we are asking Gov. Dayton to consider a win-win compromise for all concerned.

We respectfully request that

Gov. Dayton direct the DNR to allow the use of both the conventional long-spring and double coil-spring traps on Walk-In Access lands in 2014 and beyond.

Both of these traps can be understood quickly and opened easily, even by a novice, by simply stepping on the springs or levers that release the pressure of the jaws from the foot of a caught dog. Going forward, both of these trap types will be interpreted by WIA users as simply an inconvenience to hunters, but one which we can live with so landowners and those to whom they give permission can enjoy trapping.

By agreeing to this compromise, the trapping interests will recognize that we hunters have safety concerns that they will in turn respect. This means that killing body grips, snares, and tongue-catching pipe traps clearly impede hunting based on their lethality and difficulty to open, and cannot be allowed on the WIA program lands intended for a happy day afield as depicted on each posted sign on WIA properties showing the image of a hunter, gun, and his dog.

The author is president of Sportsmen Take Action and a past citizen member of the DNR Walk-In Working Group.