Montana Lawmakers: Secure Our Hunting Heritage Before It's Challenged – Pass a Strong Right-to-Hunt Constitutional Amendment in 2027

By Steve Vinnedge

As spring arrives in Montana and hunters start planning for the 2026 seasons, a quiet but urgent reality looms: our cherished rights to hunt, fish, and trap remain more vulnerable than many realize. While Montana already protects the "opportunity to harvest wild fish and wild game animals" in Article IX, Section 7 of our state constitution (added by voter-approved C-41 in 2004), recent threats in neighboring states show why we need explicit, ironclad language naming hunting, fishing, and trapping as protected rights.

Look no further than Oregon, where Initiative Petition 28 (IP28) — the PEACE Act — continues gathering signatures toward the November 2026 ballot. With over 100,000 signatures reported so far and a deadline of July, this measure would erase animal cruelty exemptions that shield lawful hunting, fishing, trapping, and even livestock farming. If it passes, it could criminalize traditions that define rural Montana's neighbor — devastating economies, conservation funding, and family legacies. Oregon's push is the latest in a national pattern of well-funded efforts to redefine wildlife management through urban-majority votes or restrictive laws.

Montanans have seen this pattern before. While activists in Oregon work to criminalize hunting, fishing, trapping, and even livestock practices, similar pressures have already chipped away at Montana's own outdoor heritage. For years, access to timber, mining, and grazing has been restricted by groups claiming the mantle of "conservation," even as those restrictions quietly erode the very reasons people use and value public lands. The Democrat Party often repeats the talking point that Republicans want to "sell off public lands," but there is no greater loss of access than stripping away the activities that make those lands meaningful. To deny Montanans the ability to hunt, fish, trap, and graze is to deny them life, liberty, sustenance, and the pursuit of happiness. Public lands retain their value because they support real use, real families, and real traditions. Take that away, and Montana becomes little more than a postcard.

Montana isn't immune. Out-of-state groups could target us next with ballot measures or legal challenges. That's why the 2027 Montanan legislative session is the perfect moment for lawmakers to finish what Rep. Paul Fielder started in 2023 with House Bill 372. That bill proposed amending the constitution to explicitly guarantee Montanans the right to hunt, fish, trap, and harvest wildlife — while preserving private property rights, respecting reasonable regulations, and maintaining wildlife management authority.

Montana HB 372 made strong progress: it passed the House Judiciary Committee, cleared the full House 64-34, advanced through the Senate Fish & Game Committee (8-4), and won Senate second reading 30-20. But on third reading in the Senate on April 20, 2023, it fell short 26-21 — missing the required two-thirds supermajority. According to the official Montana Senate vote tabulation (Seq. No. 2348), three Republican senators cast "no" votes that caused the bill to fail: Sen. Jason Small, Sen. Terry Vermeire, and Sen. Jeff Welborn.

© Larry Martin | Dreamstime.com

Senators Small and Vermeire are no longer in the Legislature. Sen. Welborn now serves as President of the Montana Public Service Commission. With those three votes removed from the equation, the path is clearer than ever for a refreshed version of HB 372 — or a similar clean amendment — to pass both chambers with the required supermajority in 2027 and go to voters for approval.

Today, more than two dozen states have enshrined similar protections in their constitutions, including neighbors like Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota, and Utah. These amendments make it much harder for well-funded out-of-state groups to push restrictive measures through legislatures or initiatives. Montana — a state where hunting and fishing define so many families, support thousands of jobs in guiding and outfitting, and drive wildlife conservation through license dollars — deserves the same level of security.

In 2027, with a Republican-controlled Legislature and heightened awareness of cross-border threats like Oregon's IP28, we have the votes and momentum to succeed. This isn't about blocking conservation or reasonable rules — it's about safeguarding the heritage that funds wildlife management, supports our economy, and connects generations to our public lands. The 2004 language was a good start, but explicit protections would send a clear message: Montana values its outdoor traditions and won't let them be eroded by distant agendas.

To our elected officials in Helena: Introduce the bill early in 2027. Build bipartisan support from rural Democrats, urban sportsmen, and everyone who enjoys our wild places. Refer it to the people — and trust Montanans to protect what makes our state special.

The window is open now. Let's not wait for a direct challenge to force our hand. Pass a right-to-hunt constitutional amendment in 2027. Our wildlife, economy, and way of life depend on it.