

Good morning Chairwoman Kulik, Chairman Maloney, and members of the House Game and Fisheries Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and give an update on hunting license sales.

As some background, I'd like to start with what got us here and why hunters led the charge for changing the law that previously allowed only County Treasurers to sell antlerless deer licenses.

Under the prior system, to receive an antlerless license, a hunter was required to first buy a general hunting license which traditionally went on sale several weeks before sales for antlerless licenses began. After purchasing the general hunting license, the hunter would then fill out an antlerless license application, check or money order, envelope, and self-addressed return envelope, and place the package in the mail to a county treasurer and hope that it arrived on the date that the county treasurers began processing antlerless license. The hunter would then wait a period of weeks or months before ultimately receiving the license they applied for, or in some cases, a returned check indicating there were no licenses available.

In addition to being inefficient, this multi-step process put hunter on an unequal playing field, as receiving a license was ultimately dependent upon the speed at which the post office delivered the license, and the speed in which the county treasurer office processed the application. These factors varied across the state, causing hunters to believe that they needed to game the system in order to get a license by, submitting multiple applications to different county treasurers, finding which post office was likely to ship the applications quickly or which

county treasurer office had the most staff available and would process applications as soon as they arrived.

This led to multiple instances in which hunters did not receive licenses through no fault of their own.

Commenting on a situation in 2021, where several hundreds of applications were misplaced at a post office and not received on time, the Lancaster County Treasurer said, “We have proven that the current system is not the fairest way to produce doe licenses. It’s actually the most antiquated and frustrating for both hunters and my team.”

Against that backdrop, the Legislature enacted Act 148 in the spring of 2022 to allow for hunters to buy an antlerless license directly from the Game Commission or any license issuing agent, including participating County Treasurers.

To implement the legislation, the Game Commission Board of Commissioners developed regulations that established multiple rounds during which antlerless licenses could be purchased. The first round of antlerless sales began at 8:00 a.m. on June 26<sup>th</sup>, during which resident hunters could buy an antlerless license for any of the twenty-two Wildlife Management Units in the state. Each of the Units has an established quota of antlerless licenses available, which is based on the estimated harvest that would be necessary to achieve the deer management objectives within that Unit.

In order to make the process as efficient as possible for our hunters, sales began for both general hunting licenses and the first round of antlerless licenses on the same date – June

26<sup>th</sup>. This way a hunter no longer needed to make a trip to the store or online to buy a general hunting license, only to return a few days or weeks later to purchase an antlerless tag.

There were two options for hunters to purchase a hunting license and an antlerless license. They could do so in-person at any of the over 650 issuing agent locations across the state, or they could buy online from the Game Commission through the HuntFishPA website.

For those who buy online, in addition to the license fees, there is an additional charge for shipping and handling. This covers the cost involved in mailing the license, as well as the Hunter-Trapper Digest, a 70-page booklet that includes summaries of the laws and regulations hunters and trappers need to be aware of when going afield. The Digest is mailed with any general license purchase that is made online. For any subsequent purchases, the Digest is not included in the packet to the hunter, and the shipping and handling fees are reduced accordingly.

We heard from some hunters this year that they no longer wanted to pay the fees associated with receiving a hard-copy Digest with their license. Accordingly, we are implementing a change to the system to allow a hunter to opt-out of receiving a Digest when buying a general hunting license. This will reduce the shipping and handling fees for those hunters.

When buying a license, either in-person or online, the transaction is processed through the licensing platform and payment system that is designed and operated by Tyler Technologies.

The licensing system was originally owned and operated by NIC Inc., who was awarded the contract to operate the license system for the Game Commission and the Fish and Boat Commission after a competitive bid process in which four entities submitted proposals. NIC was selected due to their background of over 2 decades of creating licensing systems and working with 11 other states. NIC was purchased by Tyler Technologies in 2021, and Tyler has maintained the licensing platform since that time.

After the passage of Act 148, both the Game Commission and Tyler began preparing for the opening day of license sales on June 26<sup>th</sup>.

In preparing for the opening day of license sales, our staff worked with Tyler to re-engineer the antlerless sales process and analyze the previous year's license sales to anticipate potential volumes for each round and each WMU. It was understood that the new process would change sales patterns, and with this historical data in mind, Tyler conducted more than 75 load tests to identify potential thresholds in preparation for opening day. As problems were identified during this process, they were fixed, and updates were installed.

For those who would purchase a license online, Tyler used the software "Queue-it" to manage the user experience through controlling online traffic. This software is widely used to manage short-term increases in website visitors that are well beyond what a site typically experiences throughout the year. Queue-it creates a virtual waiting room for overflow traffic once a site has reached its capacity. Visitors are given a place in the queue and can access the site as the traffic allows. There is also the option for visitors to provide an email address so that

they would be notified when it is their turn to access to the site and purchase a license. At this time, texting is not an available option in place of email.

Despite all the efforts to prepare, we knew going into the first day of licenses sales on June 26<sup>th</sup> of the possibility that the volume of sales was going to present problems for the system to handle. And that is what happened.

Both in-person and online sales were progressing for the first hour and a half that morning, until the system slowed down to a near halt for roughly a two-hour period. This caused considerable backlog and delays. During that timeframe we heard from numerous hunters who were upset about not yet being able to buy a license. You heard from those hunters as well and the concerns they were experiencing regarding whether they would be able to purchase a license.

The system eventually came back on fully and started processing sales around 11:00 a.m., and by the end of the first day the online queue was empty of waiting hunters, and anyone who had waited throughout the day to buy a license had a chance to buy one.

When the first day was finished, we had sold 166,108 general hunting licenses, and 164,666 antlerless licenses, making it, far and away the number one sales date on record in the Game Commission's history.

A big part of the reason this day was the biggest we've ever experienced for sales is previously, county treasurer offices did not process all the antlerless licenses on the same day they arrived. An application may have been received by a county treasurer on a Monday, but not processed until Thursday. The current system processes all sales immediately, so this year a

hunter who went to a store to buy an antlerless license was able to leave the store with the license in-hand, or know immediately if a WMU was exhausted and a different selection needed, something that never occurred previously.

It is important to note that by end of the first day, all Wildlife Management Units still had antlerless licenses available, meaning all of the almost 165,000 hunters who bought an antlerless license on that date did so for the Unit of their choosing.

Once the initial rush from the first day had passed, the licensing system worked well throughout the rest of the summer, including the remainder of the first round, which saw an additional 282,000 general hunting licenses and 266,000 antlerless licenses sold, bringing the sales total for that first two weeks to over 448,000 general hunting licenses and 430,000 antlerless licenses.

The system performed well for the non-resident hunter round, when approximately 78,000 general hunting licenses and 78,000 antlerless licenses were sold.

The system performed well during the second round of antlerless sales when just under 300,000 antlerless licenses were sold.

The system performed well during the third round, which also included sales for Deer Management Assistance Program tags, during which over 110,000 antlerless licenses, and over 39,000 DMAP tags were sold.

On the opening day of the fourth round, the system had a 15–20-minute delay due to a configuration issue from a software update. The problem was quickly identified and addressed,

and license sales resumed for the remainder of the 4<sup>th</sup> and final round and approximately 85,000 more antlerless licenses were sold.

All told, since the licenses went on sale on June 26<sup>th</sup>, we have sold a total of 640,038 general hunting licenses, 1,034,384 antlerless licenses and 2,670,597 total licenses, permits and privileges across all categories. That total represents nearly a 10% increase compared to last year at this time. And the only time that there were significant wait periods, and the system could not handle the volume of sales was June 26<sup>th</sup>. For the remainder of the time that licenses have been on sale, from June 26<sup>th</sup> until today, none of the issues that presented themselves on the first day of the first round have reoccurred. Hunters have been able to get their licenses with little to no wait time, both for in-person and online sales.

To put it in perspective, as we sit here today on September 26<sup>th</sup>, licenses have been on sale for over 90 days – and only on 1 day did the system struggle to handle the volume of sales, which resulted in significant wait times.

That leads to the main question for us, and undoubtedly you as well, which is what can be done to make sure that the system works well all the time next year, including, and especially, the first day of sales.

First, we continue to work with Tyler to increase system capacity with server resources that will permanently accommodate the volume we experienced during peak sales periods. We are also modifying the system to reduce the processing time for each transaction to manage the online queue faster. These improvements are already underway and are part of the reason why sales have gone so well. Continuing to improve and update the system is an ongoing

process, one that we are committed to, in order to provide the best possible experience for our customers.

And second, a significant part of the solution is working with hunters to avoid that opening morning rush and reduce the volume on the system.

As I mentioned, on the morning of the second day, after all the initial sales had passed and everyone who wanted a license had a chance to buy one, every Wildlife Management Unit in the state still had antlerless licenses available. That continued until midway through the third day of the first round, when only one Unit sold out of licenses.

All of the remaining 21 Units would continue to have licenses available through the end of the first round for non-residents, when 2 more Units sold out of licenses. By the time the second round of licenses started, 18 Units still had licenses available.

As we look ahead to next year, the importance of knowing the rate of which Units will sell out of licenses can't be overstated. We will make hunters aware that, for the vast majority of them, there is no need to stand in line or be on the HuntFishPA website the first morning that licenses go on sale. Instead, they will create a better experience – for themselves and other hunters as well – by simply waiting a day or two and spreading out the transactions over a longer period of time, and at a time that's more convenient for them. After all, that is the goal of this new system; to make license purchasing easy and convenient.

This knowledge can distinguish antlerless licenses sales from other events, such as sporting events and concerts, that have had substantial wait times for tickets. For those types



of events, there is typically more demand than there is supply, creating a justifiable urge to be among the first in line.

It doesn't have to be that way for antlerless licenses sales. Given the fact that most Units still had licenses available at the end of the first round, at the end of the second round, and even into the third round, there is no need for most hunters to rush to purchase a license on the first hours of the first day.

I want to be clear that none of this should be construed as in any way blaming hunters for the opening day rush of sales that we experienced this year. This was a brand-new process. Neither hunters, nor us at the Game Commission, had any way of knowing if a Unit was going to sell out in the first hour, first day, first week, or first round. Not wanting to take a chance at missing out on a license, thousands of hunters put up with the inconvenience and frustrations felt widely on that day to be sure they got their license. I apologize to those hunters for the delays they experienced and thank them for their commitment in purchasing a license.

But for the hunters who bought licenses later throughout the summer, be it in any of the subsequent rounds or even later in the first round, they have already experienced how well the system can work when the volume is not overwhelming, and things are functioning smoothly.

Even some hunters who might be generally critical of the agency, had to admit that the process was an improvement over the old system.

Take for instance one letter that appeared in an outdoor publication in which one Pennsylvania hunter from Berks County wrote, "With all the wailing and gnashing of teeth I

heard last week about buying a hunting license, after five days I decided to give it a try to see for myself. So I signed in, updated my information, renewed my Senior Lifetime License, clicked on the tags I wanted and I was done...That was easy...I'm no fan of the Game Commission, but I gotta give the agency credit for streamlining this process and making it so easy."

The experience this hunter had is what we want all hunters to have moving forward. And as we prepare for next year, our efforts in continuing to work with Tyler to upgrade the system, and our hunters to better regulate the timing of sales, will be a substantial step toward getting us there, and avoiding the delays that took place on June 26<sup>th</sup>.

I thank the Committee for the chance to appear here today and provide this update. I appreciate the feedback I have received from you over the past few months and suggestions for how we can improve. I value your input and share your goal of providing the best customer experience for those who buy a license. This has been our mission from even before the date that licenses went on sale. Our practice has been to find what needs to be improved, make the necessary changes, and keep refining the system. We have done that throughout this year and will continue doing it for the years to come.

I also thank the Committee and those who were instrumental in amending the law and bringing about Act 148. Implementing change of this nature is never easy. I think we all expected that there would be bumps along the way, particularly in this, the first year. The fear of what those "bumps" would look like is why it took so long to replace an antiquated and inefficient system. But you listened to the hunters and provided them the modernized process they were asking for.

Now that we have gone through the necessary growing pains, we will use the information we learned to make the opening day of licenses sales better in the years ahead.

I'm glad to answer any questions you may have.

