



UNITED WE STAND

Semi-Auto Centerfire for Big Game

8/1/23

In November of 2016, HB263 was passed and signed into law as [Act 168](#). This legislation gave the Pennsylvania Game Commission the sole discretion to authorize air rifles and semi-auto action types for use in hunting game in the Commonwealth of PA.

The act clearly states: **A semiautomatic rifle may be used to hunt game in accordance with regulations promulgated by the commission.**

Prior to this Act, semi-auto firearms were, in essence, banned by statutory law from use for hunting. Shortly after Act 168 became law, PGC authorized semi-auto rimfire for use in hunting small game. It was implied by many in PGC leadership that this was to be the first part of a "soft" rollout, and eventually within a year or 2, semi auto centerfires would be added to the list of action types that could be used to harvest large game in the Commonwealth.

Here we are, almost 10 years later, and it would appear that the Commission is more interested in playing anti-gun politics, rather than follow through with their implied promise.

What is the hold up? Is it the action type or is it "the gun"?

Let us first look at the semi-auto action. The PA Game Commission has traditionally allowed semi-auto shotguns for large game in special regulation areas, such as some of the most densely populated areas of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia and Allegheny Counties), as Title 34 (Game Laws) did not place any such restrictions on shotguns. In 2018, it was proposed to expand use of semi-auto shotguns for firearm deer, bear and elk seasons across the state. This was proposed in an effort to "expand hunting opportunities" within the Commonwealth.

Since the introduction of semi-auto rimfire rifles for use in hunting small game, there have been no negative changes in small game harvesting and there has not been any additional safety issues due to use of semi-autos during small game season.

Our organizations have done extensive research in the past, research that was shared with PGC, and semi-auto rifles are indeed safer than other action types. Brian Hoover made statement in a 2/1/19 PGC press release (while he was a commissioner) echoing this sentiment, "While many states allow the use of semiautomatic rifles for hunting big game, and evidence suggests these firearms actually can be safer than their manually operated counterparts..."

Even though it is very cumbersome and confusing, the PAGC does in fact authorize semi-auto firearms for a variety of hunting; however, centerfire semi-auto rifles are NOT permitted for large game. Why?

[The 2023-2024 Hunter Trapper Digest states:](#)

“Page 17 – FIREARMS AND DEVICES: Semiautomatic (autoloading) rifles, air- or gas-operated rifles and manually operated handguns may be used for hunting small game and furbearers.”

“Page 21 – BIG GAME REGULATIONS: Manually operated or semiautomatic centerfire shotguns (shotguns do not have to be plugged) that propel single projectile ammunition.”

“Page 25 – FIREARMS DEER SEASON: (authorized firearms) Semiautomatic centerfire shotguns that propel single projectile ammunition can be used while hunting deer, bears and elk.”

“Page 43 - FIREARMS FOR HUNTING SMALL GAME: Manually operated and semiautomatic 10-gauge or less shotguns with a capacity of no more than 3 shells in the chamber and magazine combined; 2) Manually operated and semi-automatic rifles and manually operated handguns 22-caliber rimfire or less.”

“Page 50 - FIREARMS FOR HUNTING FURBEARERS: Semi-automatic and manually operated rifles, manually operated handguns of any caliber, manual or semiautomatic shotguns and, bows and crossbows can be used. Muzzleloading rifles or handguns that propel single-projectile ammunition can be used. Air- or gas-operated firearms of at least 22-caliber and propel a single-projectile pellet or bullet can be used. Persons hunting coyotes, foxes, bobcats, raccoons, striped skunks, opossums and weasels may use gun-mounted lights that do not project a laser-light beam, as well as handheld and sporting-arm mounted night-vision and infrared (thermal) optics.”

Clearly, safety is not an issue with using semi-auto firearms in the Penn’s Woods or PGC would not have authorized so many variations of semi-auto firearms for hunting and fur-taking. As a matter of fact, you can use AR-15’s to hunt coyotes, so long as it is NOT a regular firearms large game season.

So why not use AR-15’s for large game?

The majority of States permit semi-auto rifles including AR-15’s for hunting in their states. Let us look at some of our bordering states:

[\(Maryland Guide to Hunting and Trapping 2023-2024\)](#) Page 16 states, “Rifles and handguns that shoot bottleneck cartridges may only be used to hunt deer during the Firearms Season and Junior Deer Hunt Days in certain counties and areas.” Page 28 states, “Deer may not be hunted with a firearm that is loaded with more than eight cartridges or shells. Magazines do not have to be physically blocked.”

[\(West Virginia DNR Hunting and Trapping Regulations 2023-2024\)](#) Page 5 lists the only firearm action restriction as it is prohibited to hunt with a fully automatic firearm.

[\(2023-2024 New York Hunting & Trapping Guide\)](#) Page 14 states, “It is illegal to take or hunt wildlife with any semi-automatic firearm with a capacity to hold more than 6 rounds, except: 1. Firearms using .22 or .17 caliber rimfire ammunition, or 2. Firearms altered to reduce their capacity to no more than 6 shells at one time in the magazine and chamber combined, or 3. Autoloading pistols with a barrel length of less than 8 inches. There may also be additional County specific restrictions.”

[\(New Jersey Hunting and Trapping Digest 2022-2023\)](#) Page 58 – “Even New Jersey permits ‘Modern Rifles-Centerfire’ for hunting Coyotes, Foxes, and Woodchucks in certain seasons, conditions, or with certain permits.”

[\(Ohio Hunting and Trapping Regulations 2022-2023\)](#) Page 25 – “There are no restrictions to action type or caliber when hunting Coyotes or Feral Swine so long as it is not during ‘Deer Gun Season’.”

Each of our neighbors have potentially vastly different terrain, populations, and political climates. But even in states that have the most restrictive gun laws and most anti-gun elected officials, the AR is still able to be used for hunting. So, what is the reason PGC has not seen fit to allow the citizens of PA to use semi-auto centerfire for large game? It cannot be for legitimate safety reasons, or I am sure New York, New Jersey and Maryland would prohibit them.

The PGC will likely say it is because of the will of the PA Sportsmen. Strangely enough when this was last open to debate, in February of 2019, the PGC prematurely suspended the comment period for using center fire semi-auto rifles for big game hunting in the Commonwealth.

On 1/29/19, PGC issued a press release about potentially allowing center fire semi-auto rifles for big game hunting and welcomed comments. "Written comments can be submitted by email to pgccomments@pa.gov up until the April meeting."

<https://www.media.pa.gov/Pages/Game-Commission-Details.aspx?newsid=281>

On 2/1/19, PGC released this: "After receiving input from the public and key members of the General Assembly, and noting the board already is considering several significant proposed changes, (then) Pennsylvania Game Commissioner Brian Hoover rescinded his direction to staff to develop language through which semiautomatic centerfire rifles could be included as lawful sporting arms in big-game seasons. No proposal will be drawn up, and no vote will be taken."

<https://www.media.pa.gov/Pages/Game-Commission-Details.aspx?newsid=282>

Who were the "Key Members of the General Assembly" that have so much influence over the Commission that PGC would yield their authority and take away the opportunity for PA Hunters to voice their opinions on this matter? Here we are in 2023 and that question still has not been answered.

If PGC wants to sell more licenses and bring new Sportsmen and women into the woods of Pennsylvania, why would you exclude the countries #1 selling firearm, the modern sporting rifle, or AR Platform? This type of rifle, by far, outsells all others across the country and PAGC would welcome a whole new generation of law-abiding gun owners into the woods of Pennsylvania.

PGC is always very keen to welcome women and youth to join in on our proud Pennsylvania hunting tradition. The AR platform comes in a variety of calibers, recoil is much more manageable than any manually operated action type, and - with collapsible stock options - rifle fit makes it much easier for smaller-framed individuals to shoulder and deliver more precise rounds on target, ultimately resulting in a more humane harvest.

With all of these benefits; safer, more potential for license sales, more youth and more women hunters, more humane harvests, I cannot understand why the Commissioners stopped the comment process in 2019 and has not made one move towards permitting semi-auto centerfire for big game.

Whether you personally believe it is best to hunt with a bolt gun, flint lock, bow, or slug gun, the PGC has not given a reasonable explanation as to why they continue to restrict a particular gun from being used to harvest big game.

One can only conclude that PGC is continuing to play anti-gun/liberty politics. After all, it would be much harder for a Legislator or Executive to try and ban a particular type of firearm if that type of firearm can be legally used for hunting deer in Pennsylvania. Keep this in mind when the anti-gun forces say, "Hey, you don't need it for hunting, then why do you need it at all?"

Allegheny County Sportsmen's League, Firearms Owners Against Crime-ILLEA, Beaver County Conservation and Sportsmen's League, and Unified Sportsmen of PA strongly recommend that the Commissioners grant the use of semi-auto center fire rifles for big game hunting. This was the intended outcome when all of these organizations supported the PGC in 2016 before HB263 became law.

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