



MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

Thousands of people with firearms in the field. Thousands of hours of enjoyment. That's what it's all about, but one momentary lapse in judgment or loss of focus and a life can be lost or changed forever. Fortunately, we don't deal with hunting accidents regularly, but even once is too much.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of mandatory hunter education in North Dakota. The law became effective January 1, 1979, and I'm not sure lawmakers at the time could have envisioned what the program has actually meant for safer and better educated hunters for North Dakota.

Actually, to say the program is simply about gun safety is selling it short. It also includes knowing what it takes to produce wildlife, why it's important to respect wildlife, and the significance of working with private landowners to show our appreciation for their stewardship. The goal in 1979 was to improve hunter knowledge and behavior, and that's certainly the case today. This is landmark legislation and well worth the time and effort, and we're not done yet, as it sometimes takes generations to break bad habits.

Granted, not all hunters were required to take the class, since those born before 1962, and those hunting only on their own land regardless of age, are exempt. In addition, the 2009 legislature passed a law that allows anyone age 16 and older who has not taken the course to receive a one-year exemption for small game and deer licenses, as long as they are directly

supervised by someone who has taken the course, or by someone who is exempt.

After the one-year exemption, these "apprentice" hunters must successfully fulfill the necessary hunter education requirements if they want to hunt in future years.

Statistics can tell us about the number of people who have successfully completed the hunter education program over the years, and the decline in hunting accidents during that time. Those numbers are only part of the picture. One of the more important aspects of this successful program is the hundreds of thousands of hours donated by volunteer instructors. Their dedication to generations of hunters is commendable.

Past and present instructors could just as easily spend that time with family, friends, or recreating in North Dakota's great outdoors. Instead, they chose to donate some of their time to pass on their passion for the heritage of hunting so it can flourish for future generations.

A simple "thank you" isn't nearly enough, but it's the best I can do on paper. So, thank you to all hunter education instructors for all you've done for the future of hunting in North Dakota. With volunteers like that, I predict the next 30 years will be even better and safer.

The challenge we have is to maintain the hunting opportunities for the next 30 years and beyond. Given the attitude of North Dakotans and their love for the outdoors, we'll be successful in doing that.

Have a great fall.

Terry Steinwand