

Report to the Natural Resources Commission on Citizen Petition to Allow the Use of Firearms such as the NitroFire during Muzzleloader Hunting Season; Administrative Cause No. 25-FW-020

A committee of DNR staff, including staff from the Divisions of Fish and Wildlife, Law Enforcement, and Legal, reviewed the citizen's petition regarding loading muzzleloaders from the breech end of a muzzleloader with both the powder and primer during the muzzleloader season. The DNR also included questions about this equipment in the 2024-25 Indiana Deer Management Survey that was distributed earlier this year.

Most muzzleloaders on the market currently require that the bullet/sabot and powder be manually loaded through the muzzle, and the primer be loaded from the breech end. However, this newer technology has been developed with a system that allows both the powder and primer to be safely loaded from the breech end, while the bullet is loaded from the muzzle. This allows the powder to stay dry, as well as help ensure a consistent and reliable source of powder. Because the powder is protected inside a vessel, it could also increase the number of days an individual can hunt, because they are not affected by rainy conditions. The encapsulated powder charge is a factory-manufactured, precision-measured plastic vessel that contains a pre-measured quantity of black powder substitute. This option, called the Nitro Fire™ FireStick™ system, still only allows one (1) bullet/sabot to be fired at a time, and the powder, primer, and bullet must be re-loaded to fire another shot. Some respondents to the 2024-25 deer management survey mentioned that these breech-loading muzzleloaders might improve safety during loading and unloading.

The request of the citizen's petition would not change the season when muzzleloaders could be used but would allow additional types of muzzleloaders to be used during the muzzleloader season under 312 IAC 9-3-4. Muzzleloaders with this system would not increase the range that many other fifty (50) caliber in-line muzzleloaders are currently capable of shooting already in Indiana. This muzzleloader is currently already allowed during the special youth deer season, firearms season, and reduction zone season when firearms are allowed to be used.

To provide some background, the DNR proposed a rule change to allow this type of muzzleloader during the muzzleloader season in 2020, but due to the large amount of opposition, it was not approved for final adoption by the Natural Resources Commission for use during the muzzleloader season. Many of the opponents stated that the muzzleloader offered an unfair advantage as compared to hunting using traditional muzzleloading equipment. Several individuals suggested that the muzzleloader be allowed in firearms season, which is now in rule, but not in the muzzleloader season, or, alternatively, that a primitive firearms season be established for black powder and other traditional hunting equipment. Many consider this newer muzzleloader system to be less primitive, which many believe to be the intent of the muzzleloader season. However, "in-line" muzzleloaders are already allowed during the muzzleloader season, which are less primitive than the traditional flintlock or percussion muzzleloaders. They all fire only one (1) sabot/ball at a time before being re-loaded, but the more primitive muzzleloaders require both the powder and bullet to be loaded from the muzzle and don't have the same effectiveness at a longer distance. A significant portion of the feedback from the 2024-25 deer management survey felt that the muzzleloader season should involve more challenge.

AGENDA ITEM #8

The DNR reached out to residents in the 2024-25 Indiana Deer Management Survey regarding whether they would support allowing this muzzleloader to be used during the muzzleloader season. Of the sixteen thousand sixty-seven (16, 067) respondents to the survey that were deer hunters, forty-four percent (44%) were neutral on allowing this equipment to be used during the muzzleloader season, while thirty-three (33%) indicated that it would be acceptable, and nineteen percent (19%) indicated opposition to some degree. There were ten thousand nine hundred ten (10,910) respondents to the survey who indicated they hunted with a muzzleloader now. Of these respondents, fifty percent (50%) indicated that it would not change their behavior, twenty-eight percent (28%) indicated that they would be unlikely to use this equipment, and twenty-two percent (22%) indicated they would likely use this new equipment.

By allowing the use of this NitroFire™ muzzleloader during the muzzleloader season, it could increase sales of this equipment for those who want to participate in this season and do not currently have a muzzleloader. The cost of this muzzleloader is approximately five hundred dollars (\$500). However, it will more likely encourage those who already have this equipment to use it during the season.

The DNR does not have any concerns related to the deer population by allowing this muzzleloader during the muzzleloader season, and there are no safety concerns regarding this equipment. However, some survey respondents expressed concerns that allowing breech-loading muzzleloaders might negatively impact deer populations by making it easier to harvest more deer, thereby reducing the quality of hunting.

In conclusion, the DNR supports the citizen's petition request to allow the NitroFire™ muzzleloader during the muzzleloader season for deer hunting and will request approval to come back to the Natural Resources Commission with a rule proposal that would make this change under 312 IAC 9-3-3 to allow muzzleloading guns to be capable of being loaded from the breech end, including both the powder and the bullet.