

WHAT TO DO WHEN APPROACHED FOR HUNTING ACCESS - TIPS FOR LANDOWNERS

A recent study by the University of Queensland found that there are 300,000 recreational hunters in Australia, and 100,000 of them live or hunt in Victoria. This generates over \$430million dollars annually in Victoria alone, with the majority of expenditure being in rural areas. This means that as a landowner, you will be approached by hunters for permission to hunt on your property.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

As a Landowner, you may have had both positive and negative experiences with hunters – people are all different, and most issues arise because of an incomplete understanding of farming practices and Landowner requirements by hunters. Unfortunately there are bad apples in every aspect of life, and these too, may need to be managed. Most such situations can be prevented by clear communication of your requirements, and the purpose of this article is to advise Landowners of options that will lead to open and clear communication, and responsive and mutually rewarding relationship between landholders and hunters.

It is very important to remember that when approached by hunters for permission to hunt, you, the landowner, are in full control, and your decision is final – you have the law on your side.

When approached for hunting access, there are two main options open to you as a landowner. You may decline the request, in which case the hunter should thank you for your time and leave your property immediately (*if they don't call 000*), or you may enter into a "Hunting Agreement".

KEEPING CONTROL – YOUR PROPERTY, YOUR RULES!

A "Hunting Agreement" is a verbal or written contract between a landowner and a hunter, and negotiating an agreement is similar to any other farm activity involving contractors, in that there must be clear communication, clear goals and requirements, and clear consequences for failure to deliver, poor behavior or damage to your property.

When approached by hunters for access the first few minutes of discussion will make or break the arrangement. If the hunter fails the "attitude test" or you are at all uncomfortable, you should simply ask the hunters to leave. If the hunters do not leave immediately you should call the police, as failure to leave a property when directed by the landowner or manager could lead to an offence.

ESTABLISHING HUNTER CREDIBILITY – QUESTIONS TO ASK POTENTIAL HUNTERS

Should you consider entering into a hunting agreement, questions you may like to ask the hunters are:

Insurance. Are they a member of a hunting organisation that has public liability insurance for its members? (The Australian Deer Association (ADA), Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) and Field and Game Australia (FGA) all have \$20m Public Liability Insurance. You may also ask the hunter to show you their Association membership card as proof of insurance.

Visit Frequency. How often you want them to visit your property, and how they should contact you for approval to visit?

- Some landholders prefer their hunters to call a few days before each visit, in case there are farm activities occurring that may preclude hunting.
- It is unwise to say: "Come hunting anytime" because some people will turn up at all hours, day or night, and will bring their mates, who will bring other mates, and very soon you won't know who is hunting on your property.

Experience. How much hunting experience they have, and if they have completed any hunter education courses. (All hunter education courses provide a certificate of completion.)

References. Can they provide references from other landholders?

Can they meet your harvest requirements? If you have a problem with overabundant wildlife, such as deer, rabbits or foxes you can set cull goals by aiming to remove 50% of the population each year. You can allocate each hunter a set number of male and female animals to cull and reallocate quota at the six and eight month mark. Native wildlife is managed under a permit system in each state, and will require authorization by the relevant state authority. The documentation required is not onerous, and is worth the effort to stay on the right side of the law.

Fee for Access. You are perfectly within your rights to charge access fees, camping fees, or a daily access fee, and such a charge is perfectly legitimate in order to offset Landholder costs.

Safety. Should the hunters intend using chainsaws, quad bikes, vehicles and other machinery on your property they should be able to provide evidence of competency in the use of this equipment.

Consequences. You are fully within your right to dictate consequences for failure to deliver on the hunting agreement, or for inappropriate behavior.

Unforeseen situations – What if's? Your hunters need to think about what they will do if something goes wrong. Common situations are:

- **Vehicle bogged.** Can they self recover, will you recover them or will they call a tow truck?
- **Damage.** How will the hunters repair any damage they cause?
- **Poor or inappropriate behavior.** Will you issue a warning or simply ask them to leave and not return?

WHAT IS FAIR TO REQUIRE OF A HUNTER?

Farmers are a pretty easygoing lot, but it is important to remember that hunters will be using firearms, driving vehicles and camping on your farm, so think about the risks. Most deer caliber rifles will fire a bullet up to 2700 metres, vehicles can roll, or start grass fires and campfires can get away. To ensure you maintain control of your hunters, before giving permission to hunt, you should, as a minimum, require the person requesting hunting access to your property to provide proof of the following:

- At least five years hunting experience, or to provide proof of hunter education training.
- References from other landholders or be vouched for by a hunter in good standing such as a hunting club President.
- Not to pass on your details to any other person, or to disclose the location of your property, especially on social media (remember that most cameras have a GPS and automatically record position coordinates on photo files, so a simple photo of someone camped on your farm will give away your location).

- To phone you and speak to you in person at least two days before they want to visit, so that you know who is on your land, and their vehicle rego number.

LAND HOLDER AND PROPERTY RULES

Rules you may consider are: *(you may like to add or delete items from this list and to print a copy for your hunters)*

- Only hunters who can demonstrate proof of current Public Liability Insurance are permitted on your property (this is printed on the back of the ADA, FGA, and SSAA membership cards).
- Hunters to phone and make direct contact with the Landowner and to provide details of all vehicle registrations and other hunters in the group at least two days prior to each visit (no arriving unannounced, no leaving a message).
- No visitors or mates without the original individual present, who will be held fully responsible (the agreement is between you and the individual, and this keeps control of the situation, so you know who is hunting on your property).
- Discretion - Hunters not to pass on your details to others (how you manage overabundant wildlife on your property is your business).
- Vehicles only on farm tracks or on some farm tracks, or no vehicles on pasture.
- Avoid livestock – stay at least 500 metres from livestock.
- No dogs, or if you allow hunting dogs, they should be kept on leads near stock.
- No shooting near stock.
- Leave gates, troughs and farm infrastructure as you find it.
- Report all fence damage and trees down on tracks.
- No spark producing devices used from Dec to Mar (or depending on fire risk).
- Campfire safety and campsites to be used.
- Any restrictions on alcohol consumption (the law requires a zero blood alcohol content when handling firearms).
- “No go” areas such as hay paddocks, houses and sheds.
- You may allow the hunter to hunt alone, or with a few friends (who are also hunting Association members covered by insurance).
- You may require hunters to carry basic navigation and communications equipment such as a UHF radio and a Map and compass or GPS, and that these items are switched on at all times, so that they can contact you and know their location.
- You may require the hunters to debrief you after each visit on what they saw, what they harvested, and any issues encountered.

CONCLUSION

Most hunters are considerate and respectful, but may not have a rural background, and may not understand what is regarded as common sense for farmers, such as leaving gates as found and only having a small campfire in a well cleared place. Some of the suggestions in this article may seem tough, but when dealing with people, it's better to be tough up front, and to clearly explain your requirements and any consequences at the first meeting. If the hunters don't like it you would probably have trouble with them down the track anyway.