

Presentation to the Senate  
Standing Committee on National Security and Defence

Bill C-71

An Act to amend certain Act and Regulations in relation to firearms

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# ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS



*Ontario Conservation Centre*

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Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and members of the committee.

On behalf of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, thank you for inviting us to talk about Bill C-71.

The OFAH is the largest conservation-based organization in Ontario, but we also represent all possible firearms interests, including hunting, trapping and recreational shooting. Additionally, we represent 56 shooting clubs which operate 80 CFO-approved licensed ranges.

This is not just an Ontario perspective. In fact, almost all of our affiliate fishing and hunting organizations from coast-to-coast-to-coast, including our co-panelist BCWF, have endorsed our submitted brief. In total, these organizations represent approximately 345,000 Canadians.

Long-term trends show overall firearms-related crime is on the decline. Regardless of the statistics though, no Canadian should deny there is a need to reduce gun violence. It's not about the 'if', it's about the 'how'.

We applaud the government's financial commitment to crime prevention projects across Canada, as well as the funding for RCMP and Canada Border Services Agency to ensure they have the resources needed for heightened security along our borders. This is the 'how' we expect from government.

The messaging and spending clearly indicate this public safety initiative was developed to target gangs, gang violence, organized crime and illegal cross-border smuggling of firearms; however, the policy direction in Bill C-71 only targets law-abiding firearms users, and does so in a way that will achieve negligible enhancements to public safety. The policy silence on gangs, violence and serious firearms crimes is deafening. It's not surprising, firearms owners feel unjustifiably targeted. This is the 'how' that doesn't make sense to us. And so, we cannot support the bill as written.

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There is a common misconception that there isn't enough scrutiny on who can obtain and keep a firearms licence in Canada. Firearms owners are already one of the most vetted segments of Canada's population. New applicants undergo a rigorous screening process, and between 2012 and 2017, 4,637 licence applications were refused.

In addition, existing firearms owners undergo "continuous eligibility" screening to verify there has been no criminal activity since acquiring their licence. Between 2012 and 2017, 14,505 licences were revoked. Refusals and revocations occur for many reasons, including court-order prohibitions/probation, domestic violence, mental health, potential risk to self and others, and violent behaviour. In 2017, there were just over 443,000 individuals prohibited from possessing firearms.

The take-home: we have a screening system and it works to enhance public safety. Is it perfect? No. But, investing in a more coordinated and connected screening system among agencies has greater potential to enhance public safety than trying to dig deeper and look for different things.

Today, in our opening remarks, we haven't been able to do a deep dive into the bill. I hope you've all had a chance to review our submitted brief that included a thorough analysis of each section of the bill, with background context, outstanding questions and concerns, as well as results from a survey on Bill C-71 conducted by the OFAH in April 2018 of over 3,500 firearms users.

Our opposition to Bill C-71 is not partisan. It is not emotional. It was not pre-determined on principle. It was only after a thorough critical analysis that we arrived at the same conclusion for almost every proposal – it won't enhance public safety. The evidence simply doesn't support it.

Licensed firearms owners care about public safety as much as other Canadians. The firearms community is not against firearms policy. But, it needs to be evidence-based and we want to see measures that will actually keep Canadians safe.

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One of the most significant challenges we face in establishing sound firearms policy is the politicization, and therefore, visceral polarization that almost always occurs. Unfortunately, the only conversations we seem to have about firearms occurs in the media, often after a tragic event, or in the political arena. There has been a lack of willingness, on either side of the debate, to get past the rhetoric and an entrenched view that we need to start in opposition to each other. In reality, we all want the same thing – we all want to reduce crime, violent crime and the illegal use of firearms in Canada. If we stop fighting with each other, then we could turn that energy, time and resourcing into achieving real public safety benefits for Canadians.

To that end, the OFAH has been invited to participate in a formal dialogue with a gun control advocacy group facilitated by the Mosaic Institute. The goal is to build mutual understanding, seek common ground and attempt to develop public policy proposals to reduce gun violence that would be better informed and carry greater weight than either group could develop on its own. This dialogue will explore differences in perspectives between rural and urban Canadians, firearms users and non-users, and the lived experiences related to responsible firearms use and the misuse of firearms. There is a clear need for better education on both sides of this debate and we believe this facilitated non-political discourse can build some momentum to help us get there.

In the end, Bill C-71 has created confusion, concern and eroded confidence in the government's approach to firearms policy. Even for the changes we can live with, there is almost no convincing evidence to demonstrate it will do anything to enhance public safety.

If the government is serious about respecting the firearms community, then it can't move forward with Bill C-71 without significant amendments, not only to minimize the unnecessary scope of its impact on law-abiding Canadians, but also to introduce tangible provisions that directly tackle the stated intent of addressing gun violence.

In conclusion, we are imploring this committee to ask tough questions and seriously consider meaningful amendments. Our recommendations for amendments include:

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1. Increased penalties for firearms-related violent crimes.
2. Requirements for accessible and effective appeal systems for individuals when licences are refused, revoked and when verification is not granted.
3. The addition of specific provisions for retailer information security standards and penalties for non-compliance.
4. Rescinding the proposals to remove destinations for automatic ATTs.
5. The addition of a requirement for a standardized classification process that is consistent, transparent, evidence-based, fully consults firearms users and includes an effective and timely appeal system for classification decisions.