

Dove hunt opponents submit petitions

275,363 signed, 73% more than needed for vote

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Michigan voters might get the next say in whether the state should allow open season on mourning doves.

A group aiming to stop the hunt gave state election officials 275,363 signatures of Michigan voters Monday - about 73 percent more than needed to get the issue on the November 2006 ballot.

The Committee to Restore the Dove Shooting Ban needs 158,879 valid signatures to qualify its referendum. It would allow voters to decide whether Michigan hunters should have the right to shoot the small, gray birds known for their mournful song.

Coalition members said they are confident the issue will get on the ballot.

"Our margin of error is high enough that we are inoculated against any challenges," said Michael Markarian, executive vice president of the Humane Society of the United States.

The state, after years of emotional debate, held its first dove season in nearly a century last fall. Hunting was allowed only in six southern counties.

Similar trial hunts are set for this year and 2006.

But coalition members who organized the petition drive said those hunts will be blocked if the signatures are certified by state elections officials, who have 60 days to review the petitions.

Members also believe voters will side with them in 2006.

"Given the chance, the people of Michigan will speak clearly against the hunting of these birds," said Ed Powers, a member of the Michigan Human Society Executive Board.

Dove hunting supporters say they plan a counter campaign. They also plan to scrutinize every signature on the petitions.

"Turning in names on sheets of paper doesn't mean the issue will get on the ballot," said Sam Washington, executive director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs. "There will be challenges. I can assure you that."

What's next

- The petitions will be reviewed by state election officials. If officials determine there are 158,879 valid signatures, the proposal will go on the November 2006 ballot. To be valid, signatures must be those of registered voters and collected within a 180-day period.
- Approval of the referendum would suspend the 2005 and 2006 mourning dove hunts.

On the Web

- Michigan Department of Natural Resources:
www.michigan.gov/dnr
- Committee to Restore the Dove Shooting Ban:
www.StopShootingDoves.org
- Michigan United Conservation Clubs:
www.mucc.org

Washington said he wishes the drive organizers would have waited until the trial hunts were over so voters would know the impact on the dove population before deciding to expand or discontinue hunting afterward.

"Right now, they are flying blind," Washington said. "They have no data to substantiate their position other than they don't want dove hunting."

The bird has been the subject of a decades-long debate in Lansing.

Supporters of the dove hunting season say the birds present a challenging target as they dart through the sky.

They say a hunting season doesn't affect the dove population because the birds would be taken by other predators.

Opponents say hunters want to kill the bird simply for sport, not for food, because each bird produces less than an ounce of meat.

They say hunters have enough game to shoot in Michigan, and they want to protect the songbird.

Forty other states allow dove hunting.

Polls taken last year found 51 percent of Michigan voters say they oppose the hunting of mourning doves, while 30 percent favor it and 19 percent are undecided.

The polls of 600 likely voters by Lansing-based EPIC-MRA had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.