

FWP License & Funding Advisory Council (LFAC) Recommendations:

Summary of Public Comments

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INTRODUCTION

The FWP Licensing and Funding Advisory Council (LFAC) submitted its recommendations on April 28, 2014. FWP conducted nine public meetings to solicit feedback on the LFAC recommendations (Billings, Butte, Bozeman, Glasgow, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, Miles City, and Missoula). FWP has also provided an opportunity for people to submit comments online or via email. As of June 16, 2014, FWP has received a total of 88 comments. This includes comments made at the public meetings and comments submitted online. Not every comment was directed at the LFAC recommendations. A few comments did not pertain to licensing, funding, expenditures, or other related topics but were included as a part of the original comments (separate document). The remainder of this document offers a qualitative summary of the comments.

OVERALL SUPPORT OR OPPOSITION TO LFAC RECOMMENDATIONS

Support

The majority of the people who provided comments expressed support for the LFAC Recommendations. Some of this support was general and not specific to a particular recommendation. Other comments voiced support for particular recommendations (noted elsewhere in this document). The overriding message from supporters was that the proposed changes are reasonable given the quality of fishing and hunting opportunities in Montana, and the importance of managing fish and wildlife to ensure there will be similar opportunities for future generations of Montanans and visitors. Some people noted that it will be important for hunters and anglers to voice their support for these proposals, that FWP can't effectively promote these on its own.

Opposition

A small minority of those who provided comment are opposed to the LFAC recommendations. Some of this opposition targeted specific elements of the recommendations (noted elsewhere in this document). A few people commented that FWP should be reducing its expenditures instead of raising its license fees. Some of these stated concern that FWP has increased its expenditures over time. One person proposed a 10% budget reduction. A couple people opposed the LFAC recommendation because they disagree with some other aspect of FWP, e.g., the department's five week season.

INCREASE IN LICENSE FEES

Support

Many people expressed support for increasing the license fees. Several of these supporters suggested that the proposed increases should be higher in order to ensure that FWP has adequate funding and is able to respond to unforeseen management needs/issues, unfunded mandates, etc. Some people noted that the cost of fishing and hunting license is inexpensive entertainment and a very small expense when compared to the other outdoor recreation related expenses, e.g., the cost of ammunition, lures, gas, etc. Some commented that the proposed license fees are minor enough to be affordable to even those who are earning a minimum wage. Others noted that Montana licenses are undervalued when comparing to other similar states, and especially given the quality of the hunting and fishing opportunities in Montana. Another comment supported a fee increase as long as the department eliminates programs/work that is not needed.

Opposition

Some people expressed concern that if FWP raises license fees, the result will be fewer people purchasing licenses. Some of these concerns came from residents who said that the individual proposed changes (increases) were not overly prohibitive on their own, but that cumulatively the impact could be real and lead to hunting becoming a rich man's sport. They noted that the cost of living is going up and that for some people this means having less money for purchasing licenses.

FOUR-YEAR LICENSE FEE REVIEW CYCLE

Support

A number of people expressed support for the proposed 4-year funding review cycle. They noted that a 10-year cycle is unheard of in the private sector, and that it makes little sense for the agency to continue projecting revenue and expenditures over a 10-year time period – there are too many unknown variables that can change things over time.

Opposition

Two people opposed the idea of a four-year cycle. They are concerned that by going to the legislature more frequently, there are more opportunities for them to deny a fee increase. One person expressed concern over the cost of going through a review every four years, e.g., the cost of conducting public meetings.

STANDARDIZING FREE AND DISCOUNTED LICENSES

Support

There was considerable support for standardizing the senior free and discounted licenses at 50% of the full price and/or increasing the eligibility age to 67. Some of the supporters indicated that they are seniors and favored paying more than they currently pay. A few people noted that some individuals begin receiving social security as early as age 62, and to be cautious about suggesting that the age 67 was chosen because it is when social security starts. A few people suggested that FWP consider a phase-in period during which those people who are eligible for free licenses at such time the change goes into effect would be allowed to continue receiving free licenses. A smaller number of people express support specifically for standardizing other free and discounted licenses, e.g., youth and disabled. One person expressed support specifically for retaining free and discounted licenses for veterans. One person commented that no one should receive free or discounted licenses.

Opposition

Of those who commented on the standardized discounts, there was a minority who opposed changing the free and discounted licenses for seniors. Critics stated that seniors have already contributed substantially to fish and wildlife management through the purchase of licenses, and that they have earned the right to receive free licenses. Others commented that some seniors, e.g., those on fixed incomes, do not have the financial means to pay for licenses and therefore should be granted discounts or free licenses. There is concern that these changes could lead to buyer resistance. One person expressed concern that the proposed changes to youth licenses could discourage youth from hunting.

ESTABLISHING A NEW BASE HUNTING LICENSE

Support

Some people specified support for the proposed base hunting license. They view this as a reasonable means of generating revenue. A few people suggested that in addition to the new base license, FWP should also consider increases in the cost of species-specific licenses, that there are undervalued compared to other similar states and given the quality of the fish and wildlife

resources in Montana. One person recommended that the base license cost more for those who hunt during the archery and the firearm seasons.

Opposition

There were no comments specifically opposed to the base license.

INCREASE PRICES FOR BISON, MOOSE, MOUNTAIN GOAT, AND MOUNTAIN SHEEP NONRESIDENT LICENSES

Support

There was general support for increasing the cost of the nonresident moose, sheep and goat license fees. Some supporters, though, argued that the proposed increase is not enough and should be substantially more given that the quality and demand for these hunts.

Opposition

A few people cautioned against raising any nonresident license fees due to concern that this could lead to further buyer resistance.

CAP THE PRICE OF THE B-10 AND THE B-11 LISENCE AT \$999 AND \$625

Support

Several people agreed that there will be significant buyer resistance if nonresident license continue to increase. One nonresident commented that a cap isn't enough, that there already is significant buyer resistance and therefore nonresident license fees should be reduced from what they are now, and that this would result in more licenses sold.

Opposition

A few comments opposed this idea, noting that the pricing for the B-10 and B-11 licenses came about from a citizens' initiative and that it is inappropriate for FWP to consider changes. One person commented that it is not the price of these licenses that deters nonresidents, but that it is the presence of wolves that affects purchasing decisions. One person noted that the citizens' initiative might not have passed without the built-in annual increases. One person commented that FWP should raise the nonresident license fees instead of the resident fees.

REVISE THE REFUND POLICY TO ALLOW NONRESIDENTS A 95% REFUND

Support

One person noted that they are a nonresident who cannot afford to keep applying for permits [if the license refund policy remains the same], that there needs to be a change in the refund policy or nonresidents will no longer come to Montana to hunt. They also commented that the refund should be the same whether you are a resident or a nonresident.

Opposition

One person opposed changing the refund amount for nonresident and expressed concern that this change would undervalue the licenses and lead to more people applying for permits.

REDIRECTING MONEY FROM EARMARKED ACCOUNTS

Support

There were no comments in favor of removing funds from the earmarked accounts (programs).

Opposition

Although the LFAC did not propose redirecting money from earmarked accounts, several people submitted comments in opposition to this idea. They noted that the earmarked programs are of value to hunters and anglers and should not be reduced.

DEVELOP/PROVIDE MECHANISMS IN ADDITION TO LICENSE \$ TO FUND FISH/WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Support

There was broad support for developing mechanisms for non-license buyers to help pay for the cost of fish and wildlife management. There was recognition that there are people who benefit from fish and wildlife management but don't currently have a means of helping to pay for that unless they purchase a fishing or hunting license. There was a comment that the non-license buyers need to be a part of the discussion on the best mechanism for assessing a fee to this group of people. Others commented that FWP and the legislature should address this issue now and not wait longer, that it is not fair to continue placing the entire burden on license buyers. Some mentioned specific ideas, such as the conservation license or a non-game license. One person advised funding mechanisms for non-hunters and non-anglers should focus on the user, not their equipment, e.g., not a boat decal. They were recalling a failed attempt at a previous legislative session to establish a boat decal, and critics observed that many people have several boats and a boat decal would get cost-prohibitive. One person suggested pursuing revenue from general tourism, e.g., bed tax money.

Opposition

There was no specific opposition to developing new funding mechanisms but one person cautioned that the non-consumptive (non-hunting and non-angling) constituents are the ones who are often critical of the department's work and/or hunting, trapping, etc.

CHANGES TO RESIDENT AND NONRESIDENT FISHING LICENSES

There were no comments that focused specifically on the proposed changes to the fishing licenses. There were numerous people who expressed general support for increasing hunting and fishing license fees (noted elsewhere in this document).

COMMENTS ON IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS FOR HUNTING AND FISHING

Access was a recurrent theme in the comments - many people commented on how important it is for FWP to work on providing more access for hunting and fishing. Many of these people made a connection between access and revenue, that by providing more quality access there will be more people buying licenses, and that failing to provide adequate access could lead to fewer license

buyers. There was a comment that FWP should use the revenue from license fee increases to lease more DNRC land for habitat and hunting opportunities. There was a comment that FWP should discontinue purchasing property and instead use that money for programs.

COMMENTS ON COMPLEXITY OF REGULATIONS

Several people commented that FWP regulations are too complex. Some suggested that the complexity of the regulations is a deterrent to nonresidents choosing to hunt here. Of those expressing concern over the complexity of regulations, it appears that much of that concern is directed at the hunting and fishing regulations, rather than the license structure itself.

OTHER COMMENTS

- Recommendation to eliminate nonresident student licenses.
- Concern that failure to increase license fees would lead to loss of federal aid that requires a match of general license dollars.
- Concern that the LFAC didn't include average sportsmen.
- Comment that legislature should not be dictating how FWP spends its money.
- Recommendation to charge more for a second elk license.
- Recommendation to allow residents to purchase surplus nonresident deer and elk permits.
- Recommendation to establish a 6-month fishing license at a reduced cost.
- Comment that people don't realize the impact wildlife can have on livestock producers, and that more needs to be done to create access and hunting opportunities to reduce numbers.
- Recommendation that FWP establish a donation option through which a conservation license buyer can donate additional money to the department.
- Recommendation that FWP allow someone to transfer their tag to a youth.
- Recommendation that FWP issue a free wolf license with each hunting license.
- Recommendation to increase the nonrefundable portion of permit applications for bison, sheep, moose and goat, and use additional revenue for buy/improve habitat for these species.
- Recommendation to require deer/elk/antelope hunters to acquire a tag for archery season and a tag for general rifle season, and not allow hunting in both seasons.
- Recommendation that if wildlife is found primarily on private land, FWP should reevaluate paying DNRC for hunting access on state land.
- Request that FWP have more of a presence at Land Board meetings to provide input to DNRC regarding habitat and easements for access.
- Recommendation that FWP should pursue federal funding to help pay for management of delisted species, that hunters and anglers should not have to pay the entire cost.