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State House

Fish and Game bills ask for life preserver
One would tap rooms and meals tax

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Funneling a portion of the rooms and meals tax to the Fish and Game Department would help keep the agency afloat, warding off layoffs and cuts in services, Fish and Game supporters said yesterday. The proposal - one of several bills lawmakers have introduced to shore up Fish and Game's finances - would bring the department more than \$4.7 million annually.

The department's financial woes result from a decline in revenue coupled with mounting responsibilities. Unlike most other state departments, Fish and Game must pay for its operations through the fees it collects. But the number of people purchasing hunting and fishing licenses is on the decline. And over the years, the department has taken on more tasks, including conservation of wetlands and open space, search and rescue, and public education.

Now, Fish and Game faces a multimillion dollar shortfall for the upcoming two-year budget. If the department doesn't raise at least \$1.6 million annually for the next two years, numerous employees could be laid off. To maintain equipment and move the department to solid financial footing, Fish and Game needs an additional \$6 million each year, officials said.

The House Ways and Means Committee, which held a public hearing yesterday on the proposal, hasn't decided whether to recommend the proposal to the full House, said Rep. Susan Almy, its chairwoman. Members will discuss the bill in the coming weeks.

"I'm not sure where the committee is going to be on this," Almy said. "I do want to try to understand more about the bills going into the other committees and how they all fit together. But it's obvious we have a problem and that the problem belongs to the state."

Sentiment at yesterday's hearing was decidedly in favor of the bill. Dozens of Fish and Game officials and supporters crowded the hearing room, forcing committee members to extend the session into the afternoon. Of more than 20 people who signed up to testify,

one opposed the plan and one was neutral, Almy said.

"The well is dry; we need help," said Rep. Robert L'Heureux, a Merrimack Republican who sits on the House Fish and Game Committee and is a co-sponsor of the bill. "The Fish and Game Department, by their efforts, have generated an awful lot of revenue for the state."

Through its wildlife conservation efforts and search-and-rescue missions, Fish and Game serves all New Hampshire residents, supporters of the bill said. And the department bolsters the state's economy, drawing moose-watchers, recreational boaters, and hunters and anglers to New Hampshire, they said. Each year, hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers generate an estimated \$579 million for New Hampshire, according to the federal government.

Patrons of restaurants and hotels pay an 8 percent tax, 60 percent of which goes to the state's general fund. If the bill passes, 4 percent of that 60 percent would go to Fish and Game, an amount state officials estimate would be about \$4.7 million in the next fiscal year.

Several committee members expressed support for Fish and Game yesterday but questioned how the state would manage to pay for the proposal. Lawmakers are gearing up for a tight budget season, and they have to contend with the surging cost of benefits and declining federal support for some state services.

"If Fish and Game gets it, somebody else won't," said Rep. William Butynski, a Hinsdale Democrat.

But if Fish and Game is forced to cut services, the state will see a decline in revenue from the rooms and meals tax, said Rep. David Smith, a Nashua Democrat and the bill's sponsor. "More and more, people are using Fish and Game programs but not paying for them," Smith said. "They're now providing public functions. It's time they receive public support."

Fish and Game was created more than 70 years ago to maintain stocks for hunters and anglers. Even as the department took on more responsibilities, it relied on hunting and fishing licenses.

In past years, Fish and Game coped by raising the fees of hunting and angling permits. But the high fees deterred would-be hunters and anglers. And the department also suffers from a nationwide trend: the decline of hunting and fishing. Fish and Game now sells 25 percent fewer hunting licenses than it did in 1995. Fishing licenses have dropped by 10 percent.

For more than a year, Fish and Game officials have collected fundraising ideas, preparing to deal with the coming budget shortfall. The rising cost of health insurance premiums and medical benefits for retirees has only added to the problem. If officials fail to raise money for the upcoming budget, which begins in July 28, full-time employees and 36 part-time employees could find themselves without work, Fish and Game Executive Director Lee Perry has said.

Lawmakers have introduced or expect to introduce a host of other bills to address Fish and Game's financial woes.

Rep. Dennis Abbott, chairman of the House Fish and Game Committee, has proposed charging saltwater anglers an annual fee, a move Fish and Game says would generate about \$1 million annually. Some lawmakers have also proposed increasing hunting and angling fees for nonresidents. Other measures focus on search-and-rescue operations: One would give Fish and Game \$200,000 in state money to spend on search and rescue.

A proposal to charge owners of non-motorized boats an annual fee would generate about \$1.5 million annually, according to department officials. That plan has angered many kayak and canoe owners, who argue that they don't adversely affect the state and therefore shouldn't face a fee.

Other lawmakers have focused on merging portions of Fish and Game with other agencies. Rep. Marshall Quandt, a Republican from Exeter, wants lawmakers to create a committee to determine whether Fish and Game should be absorbed by other state agencies. And Rep. Mary Beth Walz, a Bow Democrat, has proposed establishing a committee to study whether the marine patrol and Fish and Game's law enforcement officers should merge.

In addition to the bills before lawmakers, Perry asked Gov. John Lynch to set aside \$1.6 million annually for Fish and Game for the next two years. Lynch unveils his proposed budget later this month.

At a press conference yesterday, Lynch voiced support for Fish and Game but left open the option of departmental restructuring. "I think we need to do everything we can to further the mission of Fish and Game," Lynch said. "But at the same time, I think we need to be open to how we do it."

"It's appropriate to look to see what we're doing, and whether there's duplication among the departments," Lynch said.

(Staff writer Eric Moskowitz contributed to this report.)

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