



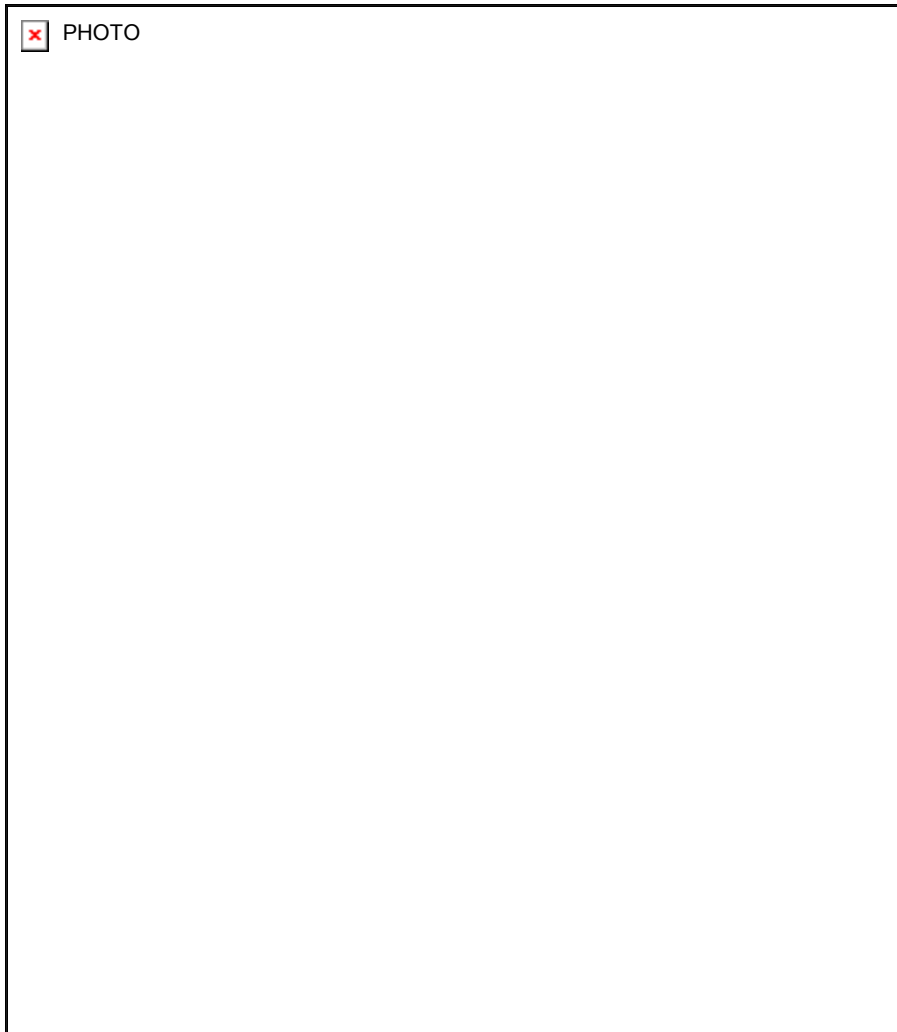
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fishing-license-illustration by Mary Francis

State angling for a debate

By Chris Outcalt and Susan Morse

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If the N.H. Fish and Game Department's proposal to acquire money from the state's rooms and meals tax is passed, it's possible the department could wait to implement a requirement for fishermen to obtain saltwater fishing licenses, according to John Nelson.

"I think it's something that the legislators need to look at," said Nelson, chief of the marine fisheries division. "That would provide a reasonable base for revenue and not charge any one group anything that might be excessive."

House Bill 376 proposes allocating 4 percent of the state's rooms and meals tax, which amounts to \$4.6 million, to the department. Currently, the department relies primarily on federal grants and user fees to fund its operations.

However, hunting and fishing is down in the state, and increased health insurance and retirement costs have the agency in a \$6 million hole.

"We're to the point where I don't believe we're going to be able to continue operating without making some deep cuts," said Lee Perry, executive director of N.H. Fish and Game.

But, according to Nelson, the \$4.6 million could be enough to hold off on the saltwater license.

The license proposal would institute a \$15-yearlong permit for New Hampshire residents and a \$30 permit for nonresidents.

The proposal also includes a single-day \$5 and \$10 permit for residents and nonresidents, respectively. The plan also includes a provision that would charge charter and party boat owners up to \$500.

Fish and Game officials held two meetings last month to generate feedback on the proposal. And, according to Nelson, the No. 1 concern expressed was that New Hampshire would be the first state in New England to charge saltwater anglers.

"I think the major point folks had was that they would like us to wait until the other New England states move ahead with a saltwater license," Nelson said. "I think everyone would be comfortable if they knew there would be a reciprocal agreement between states and that the fee was comparable."

Opponents of the plan argue that if New Hampshire institutes a fee before its neighboring states, it will only drive business away.

"Why would anybody even fish on our coastline if they could just go somewhere else and not have to pay?" said Bill Wagner, who runs Captain Bill's Charters in Portsmouth.

"You'd lose tourist dollars," said Phil Eastman, of Eastman's Fishing Fleet in Seabrook. "It would affect restaurants, people who buy bait and tackle. Why go to New Hampshire when you're 13 miles from Maine or Mass.?"

Nelson said he's discussed the saltwater fee with officials from other states, including Maine and Massachusetts, and that it's likely they will propose a similar bill in the near future.

"Whether they'll have something in place next year, I don't know," he said. "But I think within a year or so, most states will do something."

What's in it for me?

Regardless of a potential reciprocal agreement, some fishermen question why they would be required to pay to fish in the ocean.

"The state doesn't put money into the ocean at all," said Mike Pike of Seabrook. "Why should we pay for it?"

Pike is the Seabrook harbormaster, but said he was speaking as a commercial and recreational fisherman.

"A guy has five or six kids, he wants to take his kids fishing for a day, and can't afford it," he said. "It isn't like the state pays to stock the ponds. It's everybody's fish. I don't see why anybody has to pay for it. The state doesn't put money into the ocean at all. Why should we pay for it?"

However, Nelson said saltwater anglers do benefit from Fish and Game services.

Saltwater species of cod, haddock and striped bass are out there to be caught because of management practices put into place by Fish and Game, he said.

The Region 3 office in Durham monitors fisheries and oversees the habitat of the Great Bay Estuary, where striped bass spawn, he said.

Fish and Game protects the surrounding land from development.

The department has bought more than 3,000 acres around Great Bay, Nelson said. Even though much of the money has come from grants, the department's ability to purchase additional property could be affected if Fish and Game gets no additional revenue.

Staffing cuts would minimize the department's ability to do the paperwork to obtain funding, survey the property, close the deal, and monitor the land, he said.

"Instead of continuing to protect habitat," he said, "you might have condos all over the place."

The department also monitors avian flu; controls the region's deer population; does scientific study and management of marine fish; monitors recreational and commercial fishermen; maintains seven coastal ladders; and coordinates educational programs at the Great Bay Estuary Research Reserve, Nelson said.

Much of what it does is federally mandated.

"If we don't do something," he said, "then a lot of things people take for granted may not be there. The department purposely hasn't gone through the exercise of what gets cut. The mandates we have come through the state Legislature. Over the past number of years, we've tightened the belt. No frivolous programs exist. We've laid it out to the governor's office; if we had fat to trim, we could balance accordingly. It's just not there."

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