

Editorial: Proposed ban on lead fishing weights lacks justification

02/20/18, 2:58 AM PST

California has seen the number of licensed anglers fall by half since 1984, from more than 2 million to barely 1 million who purchase annual licenses.

One big reason is declining opportunities — more waters closed to fishing in both the ocean and freshwater, fewer trout raised in state hatcheries and planted, and native species like steelhead and salmon that are in a tailspin.

Another big reason is expense. The cost of licenses and stamps rises every year, even though usually the fishing is worse. A person who fishes in both fresh and salt water can spend more than \$100 annually on licenses, report cards and stamps.

And then there are regulations — tackle restrictions that can be baffling and seasons that are impossible to memorize.

Sometimes the obstacles are illogical, to the point where it seems the state is purposefully trying to make anglers throw up their hands and quit.

Such is the case with a bill introduced in the Assembly last week by, not surprisingly, a Democrat from the Bay Area whose district has almost no freshwater fishing. Assemblyman Bill Quirk, while not an expert on fishing, is doing somebody's bidding with a bill that would outlaw many lead fishing weights.

Assembly Bill 2787 was introduced Friday and quickly denounced by the California Sportfishing League.

“There is no science that justifies banning fishing weights found in nearly every California angler's tackle box,” said Marko Mlikotin, executive director of the fishing organization. “Making fishing too costly and less accessible will have a devastating impact on the state's tourism industry and communities dependent on outdoor recreation for tax revenue and jobs.”

It'll hurt areas like Butte County, not places like Quirk's district, which is why we hope Assemblymen James Gallagher, R-Yuba City, and Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, can talk some sense into the rest of the Legislature. The California Chamber of Commerce needs to speak up, too.

As in most matters in the Capitol, though, we are outnumbered, so this baseless measure stands a chance to become law.

Hard to believe, but the legislation could be worse. It doesn't ban all lead weights, just ones that are 1.75 ounces or less. That's the vast majority of fishing. Weights for trout, bass, steelhead and often salmon are usually less than that and would be banned. At least larger ocean weights would not be outlawed.

Why would a ban be a big deal? Well, there are no low-cost options. Small brass weights can cost five times more than lead. Other options are copper, bismuth and steel. All are more expensive. Few are produced because who wants to buy a single weight for \$2.50 when you can buy a lead one for 50 cents?

If the law is passed, it would make fishing more expensive and drive more people away from the sport.

Quirk claims the ban is needed because birds eat the lead weights and die. We'd like to see the science proving that. Five other states have banned lead weights to protect bottom-feeding and threatened loons. We have diving ducks in California, but no loons — and no proof any birds are dying from eating fishing weights.

We need proof, not suspicion, before further harming the once-great sportfishing industry in California and the tourism that goes with it.