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Editorial: Action needed to halt fishing license decline

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Fewer Californians than ever are buying fishing licenses, creating a \$65 million problem for the state. The Department of Fish and Wildlife seems oblivious to the trend. It's time for the Legislature to act if the DFW won't.

In 1980, a fishing license for the entire year cost \$5. The state sold 2.3 million of them.

In 2014, a fishing license cost anywhere from \$43 to \$101.50, depending on how many of the various stamps, tags and report cards were needed. The state sold less than 1 million licenses.

The DFW doesn't seem especially concerned. It keeps making the regulations more difficult to follow, keeps planting fewer trout to get kids interested in the sport, keeps raising the price of licenses like clockwork.

The DFW isn't concerned because it's all about collecting money. Though the number of licensed anglers has dropped from 2.3 million to 990,000 since 1980, the revenue from those poor persistent anglers has risen from \$21.5 million to \$63.3 million over the same period.

The goose lays golden eggs, so the state keeps demanding more eggs.

There's a limit, though. License revenue was higher five years ago. Anglers have reached a breaking point.

You can bet the DFW won't roll back prices, but it can make one change that would help anglers — selling an annual license that last 365 days.

The way it works now is, the license expires at the end of the calendar year. For avid anglers who fish every month, it's not an issue. But for casual anglers, who might fish just one or two times a summer, the story is different.

Let's say a person decided in mid-May to buy a license. It costs a minimum of \$43.50, but it's only going to last a little more than six months.

Say that license didn't expire or 12 months, till mid-May of 2016. Would more people be inclined to buy? Probably.

But when the DFW was asked to consider a 12-month license, the agency refused. It said license sales might suffer.

If the best argument a public agency can make is that it can't change anything because it won't be able to milk the public as much, that's a bad argument.

We don't see it that way. We think the DFW is just resistant to change, that it's much easier to just continue raising rates every year than think of ways to increase license sales.

We think a 12-month license would actually result in increased sales. That's what happened in some states that have enacted the 12-month license, according to the California Sportfishing League.

The California Sportfishing League is among the many organizations — including the California Chamber of Commerce and the California Travel Association — that support Senate Bill 345, which would do just that.

The legislation by Sen. Tom Berryhill, R-Twain Harte, not only would mandate the 12-month license, but would also give a steep discount to 16- and 17-year-olds to help get youths interested (children under 16 are already free).

SB345 is working its way through the Legislature, but it stalled in the Senate Appropriations Committee on Monday, where it may or may not be heard later this month.

Berryhill's bill says California ranks last per capita in the number of licenses purchased. In a state with hundreds of miles of ocean coastline, as well as an amazing array of lakes and rivers, it's hard to believe that states like Nevada and New Mexico have greater participation in fishing.

The state needs to realize that's because of poor policy and nothing else. The DFW has to remember that anglers are allies, not enemies or ATM machines. That \$65 million translates to a lot of DFW jobs and conservation programs.

If the DFW won't make changes, we hope the Legislature has to the good sense to force the changes.

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