

California Assembly committee kills 12-month fishing license bill

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Fishing guide Victor Babbitt has owned and operated Tahoe Fly Fishing Outfitters since 1994.

Maybe California Senate Bill 187 was doomed from the start.

The number 187 is a standard police code for murder and the bill put forward by California State Sen. Tom Berryhill, R-Twain Harte, was killed Friday, Sept. 1, in the State Assembly Appropriations Committee that is chaired by Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, D-San Diego.

SB187, which aimed to make fishing more affordable and accessible, was supported by many organizations representing business, labor, travel, hospitality, local government and outdoor recreation with no recorded opposition, according to a press release from the bill's sponsor, the California Sportfishing League.

The bill had passed the state senate unanimously before being dispatched without a vote in the appropriations committee, which is the right of the committee chair.

"California anglers and communities dependent on recreational fishing for tourism and jobs should be profoundly disappointed that a bill that enjoyed overwhelming support was killed in committee," Marko Mlikotin, executive director of the California Sportfishing League (CSL), said in a press release. "If the bill had been allowed to move to the Assembly floor, we are certain it would have made it to the governor's desk. Fishing reforms supported by all, and opposed by none are now dead, and so is the hope of reforming a failed fishing license program that is a major contributor to California's declining fishing participation rate."

SB187 sought to boost fishing license sales and overall participation by making them valid for a full year after purchase. Currently, fishing licenses expire Dec. 31

no matter when they are purchased, which leads to a lot of cheaper one- and two-day fishing licenses being sold, especially as the year progresses.

"We don't sell as many as we could, or should," said Victor Babbitt, owner of Tahoe Fly Fishing Outfitters in South Lake, which has been in business since April of 1994. "We don't sell very many annual licenses this time of year because people aren't sure they'll go fishing more than four times before the end of the year. I have that conversation with people all the time, and most end up buying a one- or two-day license."

Babbitt says his business, an agent with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, sells about \$60,000 per year in annual licenses, at \$47.01 per license, and says he would sell a ton more if they were good a year from when they're purchased.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fish and Game Preservation Fund suffered through a \$20 million deficit this year and the outlook is no better.

The decline in sales and participation has also impacted the quantity and quality of fish stocking. According to the press release, from 2012-16, the number of fish stocked by DFW has declined 39 percent and the number of pounds has decreased 50 percent.

"The state's fishery program is bleeding millions of dollars a year due to declining fishing license sales," Mlikotin said. "This is not going to change until California's failing fishing license system is reformed."

A 2015 CSL study showed that since 1980 annual fishing license sales decreased over 56 percent in California, while the state's population increased over 60 percent during the same period.

In addition, California has one of the costliest annual licenses in the nation, not including permits. And despite having one of the country's longest coastlines and thousands of rivers and lakes, the U.S. Census reports that only 4.3 percent of California adults fish, which ranks dead last per capita among all 50 states.

Also on Friday, Senate Bill 234 (Berryhill) that aimed to curtail illegal local fishing ordinances, such as pier fishing bans, was also killed in the same committee. In recent years, local governments have been limiting access to fishing and imposing

fishing restrictions, a power limited to the California Fish and Game Commission, said the CSL press release.

Another bill (Assembly Bill 986) is making its way through the process and may be acted on in January 2018.

The legislation, sponsored by State Assemblyman James Gallagher, R-Sacramento, aims to increase fishing license sales and revenue by making annual fishing license sales valid for a full 12-months from the date of purchase and also discounts annual fishing license for American veterans by 25 percent, and by 50 percent for veterans who have a 50 percent or greater service-connected disability.

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