
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

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Author:	Choi		
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Consultant:	Katharine Moore		

Subject: Fishing and hunting: youth program

SUMMARY

This bill would require the California Fish and Game Commission (commission) to establish a program to increase opportunities to fish and hunt for youth with life-threatening illness, and to develop the program in consultation with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) and interested nonprofit organizations who represent certain hunters and sport anglers, as provided.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

The Missions of the Commission and the Department

Existing law establishes the commission and the department in the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA).

The commission's mission is "to provide leadership for transparent and open dialogue where information, ideas and facts are easily available, understood and discussed to ensure that California will have abundant, healthy, and diverse fish and wildlife that thrive within dynamic ecosystems, managed with public confidence and participation [...] We embrace our responsibility to hold California's fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public trust, as well as their cultural and intrinsic value, and therefore work collaboratively with other federal, tribal, state and local government agencies, non-governmental organizations and the people of California to establish scientifically-sound policies and regulations that protect, enhance and restore California's native fish and wildlife in their natural habitats, and to secure a rich and sustainable outdoor heritage for all generations to experience and enjoy through both consumptive and non-consumptive activities." Among other responsibilities, the commission establishes hunting and sport fishing regulations including seasons, bag and possession limits, methods of take, area descriptions, and any special conditions.

The department's mission statement is "to manage California's diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources, and the habitats upon which they depend, for their ecological values and for their use and enjoyment by the public." In general, the department implements and enforces the regulations set by the commission, as well as providing biological data and expertise to inform the commission's decision-making process.

Hunting and sport fishing in California

With the exception of free fishing and free hunting days and other limited circumstances, a valid fishing or hunting license is required to sport fish or hunt in California for those 16 years of age or older. A junior hunting license is required for those under 16 years of age at the time of licensing. In addition, to legally take certain

species, an individual may be required to additionally purchase applicable stamps, validations, report cards, or tags¹. For example, an individual wishing to fish for steelhead would be required to purchase both a fishing license and a steelhead report card, and an individual wishing to hunt for black bear would be required to purchase both a hunting license and a black bear tag. To hunt for certain big game species – wild pig, deer, elk, and pronghorn antelope – a hunter must be at least 12 years of age. A hunter must be 16 years of age to hunt for a bighorn sheep. In addition, completion of a hunter safety education course is generally required to obtain a hunting license.

For both sport fishing and hunting, certain participants are eligible for reduced price licenses – such as disabled veterans and recovering service members. Sport fishing provides for additional reduced price or free fishing licenses for low-income seniors, the visually impaired, the severely physically or developmentally disabled, and Native American tribe members who cannot afford a resident year-long license. Hunters with certain disabilities may also be able to receive accommodations, such as the use of a motor vehicle and the authorization to shoot from the vehicle while hunting, or the authorization to use different or modified equipment to take a species, than otherwise allowed.

For sport fishing, while some species may be taken year-round, the commission may establish limited seasons, and bag and possession limits for others to provide for a sustainable fishery. Some areas may be closed to fishing for certain species at a particular time (e.g. red abalone) and fisheries may be closed to protect public health (e.g. Dungeness crab due to the presence of domoic acid), among other reasons. While there are limited-entry commercial fisheries, the same is not true for recreational fisheries.

Similarly to sport fishing, while some species may be hunted year-round, such as wild pigs, most species have defined seasons when, for example, a migratory species is present in the state, and to provide for a sustainable hunt, among other considerations. Various types of hunts in different locations – such as for apprentices and different methods of take – may be available depending upon the species. In contrast to sport fishing, some hunts – particularly for certain big game species, such as elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, and certain deer populations – have considerably more demand from hunters than animals available. In these instances, a lottery, the Big Game Drawing (drawing), has been established by regulation to distribute tags. Licensed hunters may file one drawing application between April 15 and June 2 of each year for forthcoming hunts. Each application may apply for up to two hunts for “premium” deer, and one each for elk, pronghorn antelope, and bighorn sheep. The exact method of choosing successful applications can vary between hunts – in some instances hunters who have accumulated preference points may be advantaged compared to others, while other hunt draws are random. The odds of obtaining a premium (or non-premium) deer tag in any year can be pretty good, particularly if the applicant is flexible on the location of the hunt. However, it is not unusual for there to be 100 or more applicants for every pronghorn antelope, elk, or bighorn sheep tag available. Bear tags are readily available, but bear may only be hunted until the limit of

¹ Exceptions include junior hunting license holders who are exempt from purchasing a state duck hunting validation, an upland game bird hunting validation, and wildlife area hunting passes. (Title 14, California Code of Regulations, §§313, 510, 550.5)

1,700 animals killed is reached. In addition, a limited number of big game tags are made available to nonprofit organizations to auction for fundraising purposes.

Hunting and fishing opportunities for seriously ill youth

In the last two decades, there have been efforts to facilitate the ability of seriously ill youth to access hunting and fishing opportunities in several states. For example, successful legislation in Mississippi in 2010 and in Wisconsin in 2018² modified or authorized the modification of applicable hunting and fishing requirements for youth with life-threatening or terminal illness. These laws are not uniform, and establish varying eligibility requirements (e.g. 18 or 21 years of age maximum, and description of illness), and approaches to facilitate hunting and fishing opportunities (e.g. fee waiver or reduction, and special permitting, among other provisions). In at least some instances, the participation of nonprofit organizations to facilitate these opportunities is specifically acknowledged such as through sponsoring participants and providing the support for the opportunities. In Maine, for example, up to 5 moose hunting permits annually may be issued to nonprofit organizations that provide hunting and fishing adventures to children with life threatening, critical, or terminal illnesses, among other provisions (see Public Law Chapter 526 of 2024)³. Multiple nonprofit organizations -- such as Field of Dreams, Hope Outdoors, Hunt of a Lifetime Foundation, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Foundation, Colorado Dream Hunts, Outdoor Buddies, and the Catch-A-Dream Foundation – specialize in organizing and hosting seriously ill or special needs youth for hunting and fishing activities. These organizations anecdotally report sustained interest in the opportunities they help to provide for eligible youth annually, and hundreds may participate nationwide where there are opportunities to do so. Detailed application materials to participate in one of the available programs found online illustrate the commitment to providing the logistical support necessary to provide successful trips for eligible youth.

Field of Dreams, this bill's sponsor, reports serving up to about a dozen youth annually over the last 5 years in this state. They also reported that for a sportfishing opportunity approximately 80 families showed up to participate. Field of Dreams estimates that 80 – 150 youth could be provided these opportunities annually in California through coordination of 2 – 4 nonprofit organizations, and note the impact these programs additionally have on the families of the youth.

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes the commission and the department in CNRA.
- 2) Requires the commission to determine the form of all licenses, permits, tags, reservations, and other entitlements issued pursuant to the Fish and Game Code, and the method of carrying and displaying all licenses, and requires the department to prepare and issue all licenses, permits, tags, reservations, and other entitlements, as provided. Requires both the commission and the department to establish fees in an amount sufficient to recover all reasonable administration implementation costs of the department and commission relating to the program for which the fee is paid. (Fish and Game Code (FGC) §1050)

² HB 1070 (Mississippi) and AB 461 (Wisconsin).

³ Moose hunting permits in Maine are generally only available by lottery.

- 3) Declares the legislative intent that the costs of hunting and sport fishing programs shall be provided out of hunting and sport fishing revenues and reimbursements and federal funds received for hunting and sport fishing programs, and other funds appropriated by the Legislature for this purpose, as specified. (FGC §711)
- 4) Requires a resident or a nonresident, 16 years of age or older, upon payment of a specified fee, to be issued a 365-day sport fishing license. The angler must possess the license while fishing. (FGC §7149.05) Requires a resident or nonresident to be issued a hunting license upon payment of a specified fee, as provided. (FGC §3031)
- 5) Makes it unlawful to:
 - a) Take or possess a bird, mammal, fish, reptile, or amphibian except as provided by the Fish and Game Code or applicable regulations, as specified. (FGC §§2000, 2002)
 - b) Transfer licenses, tags, validations, permits, applications, or reservations to another person. (FGC §1052)
 - c) Use or possess any license, tag, validation, permit, application, or reservation not lawfully issued to the user. (FGC §1052)
 - d) Hunt any game bird or mammal without having the required licenses, tags, and/or stamps in possession. (FGC §1054.2)

Existing regulation:

- 1) Defines “big game” to mean deer (*genus Odocoileus*), elk (*genus Cervus*), pronghorn antelope (*genus Antilocarpa*), black bear (*genus Ursus*), and Nelson big horn sheep (*subspecies Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) found in certain locations, as specified. (Title 14, Code of California Regulations, §350)(14 CCR 350).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would require the commission to establish a program to increase opportunities to fish and hunt for youth with life-threatening illness, and to develop the program in consultation with the department and interested nonprofit organizations who represent certain hunters and sport anglers, as provided.

Specifically, this bill would:

- 1) Require the commission to establish a program to increase opportunities to fish, and to hunt big game, upland game birds, and migratory game birds for youth with life-threatening illness.
- 2) Require the commission in developing the program to consult with the department and interested nonprofit organizations that have goals and objectives directly related to the management and conservation of fish, big game, upland game, and migratory game species and primarily represent licensed hunters.
- 3) Define “big game” to be the same as identified in 14 CCR 350.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, “Each year in the United States, tens of thousands of children are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness such as cancer, cystic fibrosis, or chronic heart condition. There are thousands of children with these illnesses in California that simply want to go hunting or fishing one last time. For the vast majority of these children, they do not have the luxury of waiting for the extremely small chance of being allowed to hunt or fish under California’s existing permit and tag systems. For example, in order to get a tag to hunt elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and premium deer in California, the [department] only accepts applications from April 15 through June 2 of each year. SB 1021 creates hunting and fishing experiences specifically tailored to children with life-threatening illnesses. This bill is about getting children out in nature, creating unforgettable experiences, and fostering the next generation of conservationists in California.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

Writing in a joint opposition letter, Social Compassion in Legislation states “While we sincerely appreciate the goal of providing terminally ill youth and children [...] opportunities to enjoy California’s great outdoors and wildlife, we believe that [commission] and [department] resources would be better directed toward programs which provide opportunities to enjoy the same, but without the need to kill an animal in the process.”

They continue, “Exposure to nature can provide proven emotional and mental health benefits through peaceful engagement, conservation education, outdoor recreation, and wildlife observation. Additionally, directing the [commission] to partner primarily with hunting-interest organizations limits broader perspectives and excludes conservation groups focused on the enjoyment of our wildlife with non-lethal activities.”

COMMENTS

Existing obstacles to providing opportunities for seriously ill youth to hunt and fish. From a permitting perspective and as cited by the author, the most significant obstacle to providing opportunities for seriously ill youth to hunt and fish is obtaining the tags to legally hunt the certain big game species whose tags are generally only available by lottery. The lottery is only open for a fixed period of time each year and is generally substantially oversubscribed. Tags to be obtained via the lottery must be applied for well in advance of the hunt. This issue is not specifically addressed in the bill.

Open-ended language. The bill in its current form provides limited direction to the commission in what to take into consideration when developing the proposed program, lacks clarity, and does not provide for legislative oversight, among other concerns. Of particular note:

- ***Lack of deadline for program development.*** While the commission regularly revisits its hunting and sportfishing regulations, the bill does not require the commission to develop the proposed program by a date certain. Given various constraints, including funding and other existing mandates, providing a deadline would make explicit legislative expectations for the program to be operational.

- **Public engagement and transparency.** As noted above, the commission emphasizes public engagement and transparency in its efforts to pursue its mission. Decision making by the commission is also subject to existing state law and regulation requiring public engagement and transparency, such as the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act. The department interpreted a previous version of this bill to require the development in regulations (AB 2523 (Gray, 2020)). The opposition raises concerns about not being included in the development of the program by the commission due to the lack of clarity on this point.
- **Hunter Education.** It is unclear if youth participating in the program will be required to take Hunter Education (FGC §§3049 *et seq.*) which helps to ensure safe hunting experiences and is generally required to obtain a hunting license in the state.
- **Oversubscribed big game hunts.** The commission, with the assistance of the department, takes various factors into consideration when determining the allowable hunting opportunities for elk, pronghorn antelope, premium deer, and certain bighorn sheep, to ensure ongoing sustainable hunting. In the event that the commission wishes to allocate tags for these hunts to the proposed program, this allocation should be taken into consideration when determining how many tags will be available to the public through the drawing.
- **Special hunts.** While accommodations, as noted above, may be available for hunters needing them, the state does not appear to offer special hunts for those needing accommodations, although scheduling and tag limits are tools that at least can partially address any issues raised by the use of the accommodations. At least one state schedules hunts specifically for disabled participants.
- **Legislative oversight.** As written, the existing language does not provide a ready method for legislative oversight. It is unclear that any use of the proposed program to increase opportunities will be tracked by either the department or the commission. Further, it is typical for new programs to be piloted initially in order to, among other reasons, facilitate the identification of any implementation challenges.
- **Wild pigs.** While wild pigs are part of the definition of big game for purposes of the Big Game Management Account (FGC §3953), they are not otherwise generally treated as big game in the Fish and Game Code. As an abundant species, validations to take wild pigs are readily- available.
- **Definitions.** There are at least two definitions of “life-threatening illness” in state statute (see Health and Safety Code §§1250(i)(2)(B), 1568.01). “Youth” does not necessarily need to be constrained by the ages of certain existing junior hunting and fishing licensing requirements. Explicit definitions are warranted to provide clear direction to the commission in developing the program.
- **Clarifying and technical changes to language.** In addition to the issues identified above, there are multiple drafting inconsistencies internal to the bill and other minor changes that would clarify legislative intent.

In view of this, the Committee may wish to amend the bill to provide more explicit direction to the commission and sideboards for the proposed program by adding a

deadline for program development by the commission of one year, adding wild pigs to the program, clarifying that program development by the commission will be by a public process with public engagement, requiring that allocation of over-subscribed big game tags to the proposed program be taken into consideration when determining the number of big game tags to make publicly available by lottery or auction, authorizing the creation of special hunts for the program, adding definitions of “youth” and “life-threatening illness,” providing for a legislative report about the program, including recommendation for program improvement, adding a 5 year sunset for the program to provide an opportunity for legislative oversight, and additional technical and clarifying changes. [Amendment #1]

Underfunded and overmandated. The department has longstanding budget concerns which have persisted despite repeated efforts over multiple decades to address them. When the state has significant fiscal concerns – as it does now – ensuring consistent and sustained funding for the department is particularly challenging. Recently, at legislative direction, the department undertook a “service-based” budgeting effort to identify the personnel needed to perform the services required by its mandates. The department’s services were separated into eight general programs for analysis. In 2021, the initial results of this effort were released that revealed that the department’s funding was inadequate to meet its “mission” service level. The “Public Use & Enjoyment” program – where most of the tasks associated with sport fishing and hunting are located – only had about 1/3 of the mission service level resources. The Newsom Administration proposed, and the Legislature approved, significant one-time General Fund moneys to support the department’s activities in the near-term. Some progress in addressing the gaps in service were subsequently made, although this was offset, at least in part, by new duties.

Unfortunately, a recent update (for fiscal year 2024/2025) shows that the Public Use & Enjoyment program resources remain at about 34% overall, with a 5-year average of about 32%. This does not show significant improvement. Sport fishing and hunting continue to receive significant General Fund and non-dedicated Fish and Game Preservation Fund support (in other words – these activities are not self-supporting from fees). In addition, Hunting and Fishing Enforcement is by far the largest category under the General Fund and non-dedicated Fish and Game Preservation Fund expenditures by the department.

To the extent any new fishing or hunting program is unfunded or does not generate revenue, it will contribute to the long-standing and continuing fiscal challenges at the department.

Recent related legislation

SB 718 (Dahle, 2025) would have expanded the eligibility for certain reduced-price hunting and sport fishing licenses to persons receiving public benefits from specified programs, as provided. *(This bill was held on suspense by the Assembly Appropriations Committee.)*

AB 2523 (Gray, 2020) would have required the commission to establish a program to increase hunting opportunities for youths who are terminally ill or have lost a parent in service to the state or country, as specified. *(This bill was held on suspense by the Assembly Appropriations Committee.)*

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS**AMENDMENT 1**

Revise the bill's language as follows:

318. (a) (1) On or before January 1, 2028, The commission shall establish a program to increase opportunities to fish, and to hunt big game, **wild pigs,** upland game birds, and migratory game birds, for **resident** youth with life-threatening illnesses.

(2) In developing the program, the commission **through a public process** shall consult with the department, **and** interested nonprofit organizations that have goals and objectives directly related to the management and conservation of fish, big game, **wild pig,** upland game **bird,** and migratory game **bird** species and primarily represent the interests of persons licensed pursuant to Sections **3031 and 7145, and any other interested parties.**

(b) The program shall include, but is not limited to, the following:

(1) Any hunter education requirements established pursuant to Article 2.5 of Chapter 1 of Part 1 of Division 4 of this code (commencing with section 3049) shall not be waived.

(2) The department shall take any potential allocation of an animal or animals to the program into consideration when determining the number of opportunities to be made available to the hunting community to take species with limited populations where tags are available by lottery or auction only.

(3) The department director shall notify the commission of any program activities at commission meetings.

(4) The commission may authorize the establishment of special hunts for the program within the general season for the species.

(c) On or by January 1, 2032, the department shall prepare a report and submit the report to the relevant legislative policy and budget committees in both houses of the Legislature. The report shall include at least the following information:

(1) The number and type of opportunities provided to youth with life-threatening illnesses pursuant to the program and the number of youth who participated in those opportunities. The date or dates of the opportunity and any participating nonprofit organization that assisted with the opportunity shall be included.

(2) Recommendations, if any, to improve the program. The department may solicit recommendations from stakeholders and the public.

(3) All department and commission costs in developing and implementing the program, and revenues, if any, associated with the program.

(4) Data collection efforts shall avoid duplication and use data collected for other purposes to the extent feasible.

(5) A report to be submitted pursuant to this subdivision shall be submitted in compliance with Section 9795 of the Government Code.

(d) (b) For purposes of this section, the following terms mean the following:

(1) “big game” has the same meaning as defined in Section 350 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations.

(2) “Life-threatening illness” means the individual has an illness that can lead to a possibility of a termination of life within five years or less as stated in writing by his or her attending physician and surgeon.

(3) “Program” means the program developed by the commission pursuant to subdivision (a).

(4) “Youth” means the individual is younger than 18 years of age.

(e) This section shall remain in effect until January 1, 2033, and as of that date is repealed, unless a later enacted statute deletes or extends that date.

SUPPORT

Field of Dreams (sponsor)
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
Black Pearl Sportfishing
Cal-Ore Wetland and Waterfowl Council
California Bowmen Hunters/State Archery Association
California Deer Association
California Houndsmen for Conservation
California Hawking Club
California Waterfowl Association
Captain Rollo’s Kids at Sea
Coastal Conservation Association – CAL
Dana Wharf Sportfishing
Fish Emeryville
Hunt of a Lifetime
Marina Del Rey Anglers
National Wild Turkey Association – California State Chapter
Reel Guppy Outdoors
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
San Diego County Wildlife Federation
San Diego Rod and Reel Club
Santa Barbara Landing
Stoked on Fishing
Suisun Resource Conservation District
The Black Brant Group
The Origins Foundation
The Wild Sheep Foundation – California Chapter
Tulare Basin Wetlands Association

OPPOSITION

Leaders for Ethics, Animals, & the Planet (LEAP)
Social Compassion in Legislation
Women for Wolves

one individual