
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

SB 1021 (Choi) - Fishing and hunting: youth program

Version: April 7, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: April 20, 2026

Policy Vote: N.R. & W. 7 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill 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 through a public process, as provided.

Fiscal Impact:

- Unknown but likely significant ongoing costs (General Fund or special fund). The Department of Fish and Wildlife reports that the fiscal impact of the bill is unknown at this time without knowing the full magnitude of the program the Commission might develop. Unknown impacts include, but are not limited to, staff time and resources required to create, implement, and administer the program on an ongoing basis.

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

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 2018 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). 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.

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 through a public process, as provided.

Specifically, this bill would:

1. Require the commission, on or before January 1, 2028, to 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. Require the commission in developing the program, through a public process, 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, wild pigs, upland game, game birds, and migratory game bird species and primarily represent the interests of persons licensed pursuant to Sections 3031 and 7145, and any other interested parties.
3. Specify what the program shall include.

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.

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.

Staff Comments: 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.

-- END --