

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 718 (Dahle) – As Amended July 16, 2025

Policy Committee: Water, Parks and Wildlife

Vote: 12 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill expands eligibility for reduced-fee sport fishing and hunting licenses until January 1, 2032, to persons receiving public benefits under specified programs. The bill also requires the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to report to the Legislature evaluating the effect of the reduced fee-licenses.

Specifically, this bill, among other things:

- 1) Requires CDFW, beginning no later than January 1, 2027, and until January 1, 2032, to issue to a qualified recipient, who is a resident of the state and has not been convicted of a violation of the Fish and Game Code (code), a reduced-fee hunting license (as provided) that authorizes the licensee to take a bird or mammal as authorized by the code and regulations adopted pursuant to the code.
- 2) Defines “qualified recipient” as a person receiving public benefits under (1) the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program or (2) the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs program) or a federal Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) grant program. Requires the Fish and Game Commission (FGC) to adopt regulations to establish which material demonstrates receipt of public benefits under these programs.
- 3) Requires a person applying for a reduced-fee hunting license pursuant to this bill to submit adequate documentation to CDFW to determine whether the person is, in fact, eligible for a reduced-fee hunting license. Prohibits CDFW from providing a reduced-fee hunting license to a person unless it is satisfied the person has provided adequate documentation of eligibility for that license.
- 4) Requires CDFW, until January 1, 2032, to issue reduced-fee sport fishing licenses to a qualified recipient who is a resident of the state and submits adequate documentation, in accordance with the aforementioned provisions and other existing requirements, as provided.
- 5) Requires CDFW, by October 1, 2029, to submit a report to the Legislature that evaluates the effect of reduced-fee for hunting and sport fishing licenses, as specified. Requires CDFW, for purposes of this report, to collect all relevant, appropriate, and sufficient data necessary to evaluate the effect of the reduced-fee licenses to sport fishing and hunting participation in the state, including information about data collection and enforcement costs, as specified.

FISCAL EFFECT:

CDFW will incur ongoing annual costs of an unknown, but potentially significant, amount (Fish and Game Preservation Fund (FGPF)) to determine proof of eligibility, evaluate effects of the reduced-fee, and report to the Legislature, among other tasks. To the extent expanded eligibility for reduced-fee licenses results in CDFW issuing more licenses, the department will incur increased costs related to processing and issuing additional licenses, oversight, and enforcement. In addition, this bill will result in forgone revenue of an unknown, but potentially significant, amount (FGPF) for licenses purchased at a lower price than they would cost otherwise absent this bill. Some of these costs and foregone revenue will likely be offset to the extent individuals who do not typically or have not historically purchased full-priced annual hunting or 365-day sport fishing licenses purchase reduced-fee licenses.

For its part, CDFW notes, in 2024, approximately 3.11% of California's population 16 years of age or older purchased a full-price 365-day sport fishing license. If 3.11% of the 3.48 million California residents 16 years of age or older participating in the federal SNAP program that are not already participating in an existing free or reduced-fee sport fishing license program take advantage of the proposed reduced-fee sport fishing license, CDFW estimates, at minimum, a reduction in sport fishing license sales revenue of approximately \$3.48 million. Current law requires approximately 33% of all sport fishing license fees collected (except fees collected through the sale of Abalone Report Cards) be deposited into the Hatchery and Inland Fisheries Fund. Based on CDFW's estimate, this bill would reduce sales revenue to the Hatchery and Inland Fisheries Fund by approximately \$1.16 million and sales revenue to the FGPF by approximately \$2.32 million.

During the 2024 hunting license year, approximately 0.68% of California's population 16 years of age or older purchased a full-price annual fishing license. CDFW estimates that if 0.68% of the 3.48 million California residents 16 years of age or older participating in the federal SNAP program that are not already participating in an existing reduced-fee hunting license program take advantage of the proposed reduced-fee hunting license, this bill would result in an estimated minimum loss in hunting license sales revenue of approximately \$858,000.

CDFW notes its estimates are based only on California resident participation in the federal SNAP program who are 16 years of age and older. At the time this analysis was prepared, neither the department nor this committee was able to obtain similar participation statistics for residents by age group for the CalWORKs or Tribal TANF grant programs – although it is reasonable to assume there is overlap among these programs.

Finally, CDFW contends it would need to hire at least 17 new staff, resulting in ongoing annual General Fund costs of approximately \$2.5 million for a wide range of tasks to implement this bill.

COMMENTS:

1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

[This bill] increases access to California's shared natural resources by expanding eligibility of reduced fee hunting and fishing license programs to economically challenged Californians. Although the cost

of a license may seem small, it does add one more barrier to an already costly activity that allows and encourages Californians to get outdoors.

- 2) **Background.** Hunting and fishing licenses grant individuals the privilege and legal right to take birds, mammals, and fish. The fee for a 365-day resident sport fishing license and for a resident hunting license is currently \$62.90.

Several groups of people are eligible to receive reduced-fee licenses. For example, disabled veterans and recovering service members can qualify for lower-cost hunting and sport fishing licenses. Low-income resident seniors aged 65 and older (who receive Supplemental Security Income or Cash Assistance Program for Aged, Blind, and Disabled Legal Immigrants) can receive reduced-fee fishing licenses. These discounted licenses generally cost around \$10. Additionally, free sport fishing licenses are available for low-income Native Americans, people who are mobility-impaired, blind, or developmentally disabled. In addition, CDFW offers two free hunting and fishing days each year, though certain requirements, like hunter education, still apply.

On average, about 20,200 individuals receive a disabled veteran fishing license; 1,420 individuals receive a low-income senior fishing license; seven individuals receive a recovering service member fishing license; and 14,230 individuals receive a free sport fishing license, annually. For hunting, about 5,190 individuals receive a disabled veterans hunting license and three individuals receive a recovering service members hunting license, annually. For context, every year, roughly 1.075 million residents purchase a sport fishing license and 228,000 residents purchase a hunting license.

CDFW has experienced longstanding budget challenges which have persisted despite repeated efforts over many years to address them. The department's service-based budgeting (SBB) analysis for FY 2023-24 indicates the department (including its "Public Use & Enjoyment" program – where most of the tasks associated with sport fishing and hunting are located) is funded for only one-third of its mandated program work. The SBB effort highlights the degree to which DFW operates with significant gaps between what is required to achieve its mandated mission and the level at which it is currently funded.

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