SENATE FISH AND GAME
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# When it comes to license fees, you get what you pay for

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**From the Field**

Two major issues involving Montana's fish, wildlife, and parks are before the Montana Legislature. The first is whether to renew Montana's highly popular Block Management Program. The second is a proposed increase in hunting and fishing license fees for residents.

So far, support by Legislators has been strong for block management's continuation. Senate Bill 77 would continue the program and House Bill 235 would provide alternative means of funding block managment, such as a lottery for big game hunting tags, for example.

The increase in license fees hasn't received such a warm reception from many law makers. A recent vote to move the increase to the next step in the process passed by the slimmest of margins, 51-49. As usual, the same old tired arguments surround the debate.

There are, and probably always will be, a group of folks who cling to theories of "Fish and Game" conspiring to waste money and defy the will of the people. Such claims are usually handed down from generation to generation, and for some Montanans, part of their God-given right to blast FWP whenever the opportunity presents itself.

What responsible hunters, anglers and other Montanans concerned about the welfare of our natural resources need to ask themselves is, "Is the hike in fees warranted?"

FWP has not raised resident license fees since 1991. The 1991 raise was projected to fund FWP through 1999 but nonresident fee increases extended that to 2005. During the period from 1996 to 2003, FWP spending grew by an average of 2.28 percent a year. That was under the rate of inflation (2.45 percent) for those years.

Projections past 2005 clearly show that FWP will go into the red by millions of dollars if the fee increases are not approved and FWP maintains the current level of services. From an economic standpoint, not fully funding FWP or cutting back on services is not good business.

Each year hunters, anglers, and wildlife enthusiasts directly spend just under 1 billion dollars in Montana. Jeopardizing that spending by underfunding FWP would be, well, stupid.

The license increases are pretty small potatoes. One story reported the fee for a resident deer license would go up by 25 percent. That sounds pretty serious until you consider the increase from $13 to $16 for a resident deer license is three bucks. That's one latte or a bottle of microbrew at an inexpensive bar. Three bucks isn't going to break anybody. But, it can mean a big deal to the level of service FWP is able to provide.

Personally, I don't care for legislators playing nickel and dime politics with the wildlife and parks in my state. Besides, if you factor inflation into the equation, a Montana hunting license is cheaper today than it was in 1976.

If the fee increases are not approved, FWP will have to make cuts. One lawmaker called the cuts a threat. Simple fact is that in the real world if you don't have the money, you have to cut back. Hey, this isn't the federal government we're talking about here.

One of the first things to go will be game wardens. Wardens who retire or leave will not be replaced. There's already too much poaching, and all Montanans should find that option unacceptable.

Fish stocking would also be curtailed, as would fishing site acquisition, just to name a few other negative impacts.

FWP has to pay higher fuel, electricity, equipment and other costs just like you and me. This is one problem the Legislature can't solve by closing its eyes, clicking its heels, and pretending it's 1998. As guardians of Montana's precious wildlife we need to contact our representatives and senators and let them know it's okay to charge us a couple of extra bucks to pay for the care of our wildlife.