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Montana Outdoors: Vacancy savings hits game wardens too hard

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Expect the poachers, trespassers and other law violators to stand up and oppose Sen. Larry Jent's Senate Bill 205 in the Montana Legislature.

But if you're a law-abiding citizen and care about our fish and wildlife resources, it's in your best interests to speak out and be heard in favor of this bill.

Jent (D-Bozeman) sponsored SB205 which would eliminate the so-called "vacancy savings" for game wardens in the state.

Vacancy savings in Montana state government works this way. It mandates that 4 percent of the state jobs that are open must remain open in order to save money.

For game wardens, that means at least four warden districts in the state must remain open at all times. Sometimes, they're open for relatively long periods of time, as other game wardens try to do double duty and cover their districts and the vacant districts at the same time.

The problem with this is that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' 70 game wardens in the field are already spread awfully thin from border to border.

In fact, the situation is very similar to the Montana Highway Patrol, which got an exemption from vacancy savings from the 2005 Montana Legislature.

How thin are the game wardens spread?

The average size of a warden district in Montana is roughly 1,700 square miles. That means each field warden patrols an area about as big as the state of Delaware.

Incidentally, Delaware has about the same population as Montana and has 22 game wardens in the field to cover its state.

Here are some other facts about wardens gleaned from FWP's records:

- In fiscal year 2006, wardens drove 1.3 million miles in the course of their duties across the state.
- In fiscal year 2005, game wardens across the state reported 35,028 contacts with anglers, 36,033 with hunters, 1,127 with outfitters, 9,006 with landowners, 9,485 with parks users and 1,257 with license dealers.
- In addition to that, they recorded 3,057 hours responding to wildlife damage complaints, 1,265 hours responding to human-wildlife or urban wildlife calls, 1,058 hours making presentations to the public and 1,012 hours helping with Hunter Education classes.
- Game wardens are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When someone puts out a call for a game warden, they want one now.

Putting things in even better perspective, consider the warden districts that have been left open to vacancy savings. During the recent hunting season, field warden positions for Ennis, Townsend, Hardin, Whitefish, Billings, Big Timber and Bozeman were all unfilled.

When you think of the heavy usage of those areas by hunters and fishermen, that's shocking.

It hammers home what a field day poachers and other violators could have both in the districts that were open and in the districts that wardens were pulled from to try to cover the vacancies.

Certainly, Montanans care about safety on the highways. That's why the Montana Highway Patrol was absolved from vacancy savings in 2005.

But Montanans' love and concern for their fish and wildlife runs at least that high, as well. Game wardens need the vacancy savings exemption, too. Senate Bill 205 needs to be passed into law.

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