

Date of Hearing: July 15, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

SB 718 (Dahle) – As Amended May 23, 2025

**SENATE VOTE:** 39-0

**SUBJECT:** Hunting and sport fishing licenses: reduced fees

**SUMMARY:** Expands the eligibility for reduced fee sport fishing and hunting licenses until January 1, 2031 to those eligible for certain state and federal assistance programs for low income individuals and families. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to issue a reduced fee hunting license to a state resident who is a qualified recipient, as provided.
  - a) A qualified recipient is a person eligible for either the California Alternative Rates for Energy or Family Electric Rate Assistance program.
  - b) The reduced fee is \$4 (*note:* 1995 base year with indexing, about \$10 now).
- 2) Requires a qualified recipient to provide adequate documentation to CDFW for CDFW to determine whether the person is eligible. Requires the Fish and Game Commission (Commission) to adopt regulations to establish the material necessary to demonstrate eligibility.
  - a) Defines adequate documentation to mean material demonstrating eligibility for any of the following programs:
    - i) Medicaid or Medi-Cal;
    - ii) The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program;
    - iii) The California Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children;
    - iv) CalFresh or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program;
    - v) The federal Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) grant program;
    - vi) A tribal Head Start program;
    - vii) Supplemental Security Income;
    - viii) Medi-Cal for Families (Healthy Families A and B);
    - ix) The federal National School Lunch Program; or
    - x) The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance program.

- 3) Prevents CDFW from providing a reduced fee license until it is satisfied with the adequate documentation.
- 4) Requires CDFW to issue a reduced fee sport fishing license to a qualified recipient who submits adequate documentation, as provided.
- 5) Requires the director of CDFW to submit a written report to the Legislature that evaluates the effect of the reduced fee for hunting and sport fishing licenses, as specified, on or before October 1, 2029.
- 6) Sunsets the reduced fee hunting and sport fishing licenses established by this bill on January 1, 2031.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) 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, except for those programs where CDFW has fee-setting authority, in which case CDFW retains that authority. Authorizes CDFW and the Commission to set or adjust fees [Fish and Game Code (FGC) § 1050].
- 2) Requires that money collected under any state law relating to the protection or propagation of fish and game shall be used for activities relating thereto (California Constitution, Article XVI, § 9).
- 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 (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 sport fishing license. The angler must possess the license while fishing (FGC § 7149.05).
- 5) Requires a resident or nonresident to be issued a hunting license upon payment of a specified fee (FGC § 3031).
- 6) Requires the Commission to adjust the amount of the fees for sport fishing licenses, as prescribed, to fully recover, but not exceed, all reasonable administrative and implementation costs of CDFW and the Commission relating to those licenses (FGC § 1050).
- 7) Requires CDFW to issue a reduced fee sport fishing license to specified applicants, including a resident of the state over 65 years of age who meets certain additional criteria, a disabled veteran, and a recovering service member, as defined. Similarly, requires CDFW to issue a reduced fee hunting license to specified applicants, including a disabled veteran and a recovering service member, as defined, who meet certain additional criteria (FGC § 7150).

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** 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 is currently \$62.90 and the fee for an annual resident hunting license for the 2024–25 season is \$61.82.

Several groups of people are eligible to receive reduced fee licenses. These include disabled veterans and recovering service members (i.e., a member of the Armed Forces who is undergoing medical treatment, recuperation, or therapy and is in an outpatient status while recovering from a serious injury or illness related to the member’s military service), who qualify for lower-cost hunting and sport fishing licenses. Low-income resident seniors aged 65 and older can also 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. On top of these programs, the 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.

*Hunting for hunters, angling for anglers.* As these figures suggest, participation is low, but consistent in the reduced fee programs for disabled veterans, and, for sport fishing, for low-income seniors. Although license fee costs are often cited as an obstacle to hunting and sport fishing participation, equipment and related travel costs reported in national survey data far outweigh even regular license fees. According to the 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated: Recreation: National Overview, license fees accounted for 1% of overall fishing expenditures in 2016. It remains unclear that the cost of a state’s licenses is a significant impediment to participation in angling.

In the last 40 years, there has been a steady decline in annual sport fishing license sales. For example, annual sport fishing license sales are half their 1970s levels and hunting licenses are around a third of their 1970s numbers. Notably, these participation declines occurred at the same time as California’s population approximately doubled.

California is not unique in this regard, as hunting and angling participation has also declined nationally overall which has stimulated the nationwide “R3” effort for the “recruitment, reactivation, and retention” of anglers and hunters. These efforts have not been able to reverse the downward trend in resident participation to date.

- 3) **Policy considerations.** CDFW has longstanding budget concerns which have persisted despite repeated efforts over multiple decades to address them. Most recently, the Legislature directed CDFW to conduct a “service-based” budgeting analysis to better understand staffing needs for fulfilling its mission. CDFW’s services were grouped into eight broad categories for review. In 2021, the results showed that CDFW lacked the funding to meet its target service levels. In particular, the “Public Use & Enjoyment” program—which includes most hunting and sport fishing activities—was only funded at about one-third of its mission level. A more recent update found this number has barely improved, with the program currently operating at 31% of its required capacity. Within that program, sport fishing is at a 70% capacity gap, and both game and non-game species management have a 67% gap.

This bill would expand eligibility for a reduced fee license. While these changes could help boost participation, it may also reduce overall revenue if individuals, who would have previously paid full price, instead shift into the new discounted licenses.

- 4) **Proposed committee amendments.** As written, only those eligible to participate in either the California Alternative Rates for Energy or Family Electric Rate Assistance programs are qualified recipients. This requirement limits the scope of this bill to individuals and families that receive assistance in service areas under the jurisdiction of the California Public Utilities Commission. Further, this bill requires CDFW to determine *eligibility* for these programs—a responsibility and effort outside of its mission. Existing discount programs at both CDFW and the Department of Parks and Recreation are generally associated with *enrollment* in programs, which likely reduces workload for the departments. Finally, as noted in the Senate Natural Resources and Water analysis of this bill, it may take some time for CDFW and the Commission to implement the proposed reduced fee program, particularly in view of the current state budget. *To this end, the committee may wish the author to consider the following amendments:*

**Amendment 1** – Change the definition of a “qualified person” to mean someone who is receiving benefits from programs that are operated statewide:

**3033.2 (....)**

(d) For the purposes of this section, a *“qualified person” means any person who is receiving public benefits under one or more of the following programs:* ~~the following terms have the following meanings:~~

*(1) California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids Act (CalWORKs program) under Chapter 2 (commencing with Section 11200) of Part 3 of Division 9 of the Welfare and Institutions Code or a federal Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) grant program (Section 10553.25 of the Welfare and Institutions Code).*

*(2) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Chapter 51 (commencing with Section 2011) of Title 7 of the United States Code).*

~~(1) “Adequate documentation” means material demonstrating eligibility for any of the following programs:~~

~~(A) Medicaid or MediCal.~~

~~(B) The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.~~

~~(C) The California Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.~~

~~(D) CalFresh or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.~~

~~(E) The federal Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) grant program.~~

~~(F) A tribal Head Start program.~~

~~(G) Supplemental Security Income.~~

~~(H) MediCal for Families (Healthy Families A and B).~~

~~(I) The federal National School Lunch Program.~~

~~(J) The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance program.~~

~~(2) “Qualified recipient” means a person eligible for either of the following:~~

~~(A) The California Alternative Rates for Energy program.~~

~~(B) The Family Electric Rate Assistance program.~~

**Amendment 2** – Delay the timeline of the bill one year to allow for implementation:

**3033.2** (a) Pursuant to this section, ***no later than January 1, 2027***, the department shall issue to a qualified recipient, who is a resident of the state and has not been convicted of a violation of this code, a reduced fee hunting license that authorizes the licensee to take a bird or mammal as authorized by this code and regulations adopted pursuant to this code.

(...)

(e) This section shall remain in effect only until January 1, ***2032, 2031***, and as of that date is repealed.

**7150** (...)

(d) This section shall remain in effect only until January 1, ***2032, 2031*** and as of that date is repealed.

- 5) **Related legislation.** AB 293 (Alanis) of 2023 would have required CDFW to issue lifetime hunting licenses and lifetime sport fishing licenses to eligible Gold Star Family members at no cost. AB 293 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 470 (Jones) of 2021 would have required CDFW to issue a combined hunting and sport fishing license valid for 12-consecutive-months after issuance, as provided. SB 470 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 817 (Wood), Chapter 607, Statutes of 2021 authorizes, among other things, the CDFW director to issue a 12-consecutive-month sport fishing license.

AB 2465 (Gallagher) of 2018 would have established an advisory group related to the decline in sport fishing license sales, as provided. AB 2465 died on suspense in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

**REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:****Support**

None on file

**Opposition**

None on file

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