

Date of Hearing: March 14, 2023

**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE**

Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, Chair

AB 293 (Alanis) – As Amended March 1, 2023

**SUBJECT:** Lifetime hunting and sport fishing licenses: Gold Star Family members

**SUMMARY:** Requires the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) to issue lifetime hunting licenses and lifetime sport fishing licenses to eligible Gold Star Family members at no cost. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires DFW to issue lifetime hunting licenses and lifetime sport fishing licenses to Gold Star Family members at no cost. Eligible Gold Star Family members must meet certain eligibility requirements for receipt of a lifetime license, including:
  - a) Not be convicted of a violation of the Fish and Game Code;
  - b) Be a California Resident; and
  - c) Be eligible to receive a gold star lapel button.
- 2) Requires DFW’s headquarters office in Sacramento to manage lifetime license applications from Gold Star Family members.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Requires a hunting license for taking any bird or mammal, which must be carried and shown upon request [FGC § 3031; California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 14, § 700].
- 2) Establishes a lifetime hunting license for the taking of any bird or mammal, including fees based on the age of the hunter and additional privilege packages (FGC § 3031.2).
- 3) Requires a sport fishing license for taking any fish, reptile, or amphibian, which must be carried and shown upon request [FGC § 7149.05; CCR, Title 14, § 700].
- 4) Establishes a lifetime sport fishing licenses for taking any fish, reptile, or amphibian, including fees based on age of the angler and additional privilege packages (FGC § 7149.2).
- 5) Provides disabled veterans or recovering Service members a reduced fee annual hunting license (FGC § 3033).
- 6) Provides disabled veterans, recovering Service members, and low income seniors a reduced fee for an annual sport fishing license (FGC § 7150).
- 7) Provides free annual sport fishing licenses to low income Native Americans as well as to blind, developmentally disabled, or mobility impaired individuals (FGC § 7151).
- 8) Allows the Department of Veterans Affairs to sponsor a Gold Star Family specialized license plate programs and issue a license plate for a vehicle owned by an eligible Gold Star Family member (Vehicle Code § 5156).

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

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill requires that the DFW provide lifetime hunting and lifetime sport fishing licenses, at no cost, to Gold Star Family members. The discount would not apply to privilege packs. According to the author, this bill would continue California’s long set precedent of “leading the way in honoring our state’s fallen heroes and their immediate family members. This [bill] would do more than just honor fallen Service members (and their famil[ies]); it would help provide additional access to therapeutic outdoor activities [...]”
- 2) **Background.** A hunting license is required for taking any bird or mammal. Hunting licenses are available in many categories, including: residents over 16 years old, nonresidents over 16 years old, and junior hunting licenses for those under 16 years old. Similarly, a sport fishing license is required for taking any fish, reptile, or amphibian. Short-term (one-, two-, or ten-day) or 365-day fishing licenses are available for both residents and non-residents. The 2023 license fees are \$54.00 for a resident hunting license and \$58.58 for a resident sport fishing license.

*Lifetime license.* In addition to annual licenses, existing law requires DFW to offer lifetime licenses for both hunting and sport fishing, which allows individuals to purchase a single license to cover lifetime hunting or fishing activities. Lifetime licenses must be renewed annually, are not transferable, and do not include any additional validations in the base fee. Individuals who leave California and become residents of another state, either temporarily or permanently, can keep their lifetime license.

The cost of a lifetime license depends on the applicant’s age. Currently, the cost for a lifetime hunting or sport fishing license is \$644.50 for persons 9 years or younger, \$1054.25 for persons 10 to 39 years old; \$949.75 for persons 40 to 61 years old; and \$644.50 for persons 62 years old or older. In addition to the lifetime license, DFW also offers lifetime “privilege packages” for both hunting and fishing that include validations, report cards, tags, and other entitlements that are required to take certain mammals, birds, and fish. Privilege packages can be purchased at any time by a lifetime license holder.

Anyone who purchases a lifetime license receives a new license each year at no cost from a DFW license agent or from DFW Online License Sales site after renewal. Revenue from lifetime license sales is used to support DFW’s programs, including the Hatchery and Inland Fisheries Fund and the Fish and Game Preservation Fund, which supports fish hatcheries, fish stocking, wildlife management, management of wildlife areas, law enforcement, habitat restoration, and education programs (FGC § 13005).

*License discounts.* Under existing law, certain groups are provided hunting and sport fishing licenses for free or a reduced fee. Hunting licenses for disabled veterans (a person having 50 percent or greater service-connected disability and an honorable discharge) and recovering Service members [a person who meets the definition of the federal National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 § 1602(7)] are available for reduced-fees (FGC § 3033). Reduced-fee sport fishing licenses are also available to disabled veterans and recovering Service members, as well as to low income seniors. These reduced-fee licenses are all available for less than ten dollars. Sport fishing licenses are also available at no charge

to low income Native Americans or individuals who are blind, developmentally disabled, or have a mobility impairment.

*Gold Star Families.* The phrase “Gold Star Family” dates back to World War I when military families displayed service flags featuring a blue star for every immediate family member serving in the Armed Forces. If the Service member died in the line of duty, the blue star was changed to gold and eligible next of kin receive a gold star lapel button in adherence to the U.S. Department of Defense guidelines. According to Section 1126 of Title 10 of the United States Code, Service members who lost their life during World War I, World War II, while engaged in action against opposing foreign forces, or as a result of an international terrorist attack or as a part of a peace keeping force may qualify for a Gold Star Pin. According to Section 553.36 of Title 32 of the Code of Federal Regulations, ‘next of kin’ includes the spouse, children (natural, step, adopted), parents (natural, step, adopted), siblings (natural, half, adopted), and grandparents of a Service member who lost their life in a qualifying situation.

According to the Gold Star Family Registry, which is “the first comprehensive data base of the United States’ fallen Heroes,” since World War II, 32,448 California residents have lost their lives in the line of duty. Since not all Gold Star Family members are residents of the same state as their deceased loved ones, it is still unclear how many California residents would qualify to receive a no-cost lifetime license.

*California’s Gold Star Family License Plates.* The California Department of Veterans Affairs authorizes the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to issue Gold Star Family specialized license plates for vehicles owned by eligible Gold Star Family members (Vehicle Code § 5156). The departments use the same definition of qualifying situation and qualified family members as the Code of Federal Regulations with the exception of including grandchildren. As of January 31, 2023, the DMV has issued 866 Gold Star Family license plates (650 on registered vehicles). This may be the closest proxy for the number of individuals that might be interested in the hunting and sport fishing license.

- 3) **Policy Considerations.** According to the author, this bill will honor the sacrifice of the Service member by supporting the members of their families and provide additional access to therapeutic outdoor activities. Generally, time spent outdoors is believed to reduce stress and improve mental health.

A 2013 survey, *Exploring Recent Increases in Hunting and Fishing Participation* prepared under a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, noted the top three factors cited by inactive hunters for not continuing to participate in hunting were the amount of free time, family obligations, and work obligations. The cost of licenses was 16th on that list. License cost was cited by only one percent of hunters surveyed on why they took a break from hunting (for those who took a break of at least three years). While these data are aggregated and national in scope, it remains unclear that license cost is a significant impediment to hunting. Further, for those interested in trying out hunting, the DFW is required to start holding two free hunting days annually starting in the 2023–2024 license year.

*Are other discounts offered for lifetime licenses?* DFW does not currently offer lifetime licenses at a discount or at no cost to any group. This bill sets a precedent that may result in other groups seeking a similar discount. In contrast to the lifetime passes, certain groups are eligible for discounts on annual hunting and fishing licenses as described above.

*Implementation challenges.* This bill does not clarify what proof an individual would submit to validate their Gold Star Family status to the DFW. It would likely benefit the DFW if an independent source would verify Gold Star Family member status. There is already communication between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the DFW for validating Disabled Veterans and Recovering Service Member License applications. Since there are not currently any mechanisms to provide or renew no-cost lifetime licenses, the DFW will need to create new processes to provide this service.

*Potential fiscal impact.* While outside this Committee’s jurisdiction, providing free lifetime licenses would reduce available funding to the DFW when the lack of sufficient funding for all of the DFW’s statutory obligations has been an ongoing concern for many years. Results of the recent “service-based budgeting” effort indicate that the DFW’s funding is inadequate to meet its “mission” service level.

- 4) **Related Legislation.** SB 470 (Jones), 2021–22 Session, would have provided for a combined hunting and sport fishing license valid for 12 months from the date of purchase. SB 470 was held in the Assembly Appropriations.

AB 804 (M. Dahle), Chapter 413, Statutes of 2021, requires the DFW to hold two free hunting days annually by July 1, 2023, among other provisions.

AB 240 (Wilk), 2015–16 Session, would have allowed free day use entry to state park to vehicles with specialized license plates for veterans who are high military honor recipients and Gold Star families. SB 240 was held in Senate Appropriations.

SB 1081 (Morrell), 2015–16 Session, would have require the DFW to provide free hunting licenses to disabled Veterans and recovering service members. SB 1081 was held in Senate Appropriations.

AB 1844 (Gallager), 2015–16 Session, would have required the DFW to reduce the fee for lifetime hunting or sport fishing license by 25% for a qualified veterans. AB 1844 was held in Senate Appropriations.

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

One individual

### **Opposition**

None on file

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