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Topic: : Commission hopes for multiyear fishing licenses

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Author: : acristickid

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From today's Pittsburgh Tribune Review:

Long-term benefit

Fish and Boat Commission officials believe selling multiyear licenses could help fishing in another way: by retaining children.

Surveys in Pennsylvania and elsewhere show that most kids learn to fish from their parents and want to fish with their parents, said the commission's Carl Richardson. He also said that, if parents fish, it's more likely that their children will fish.

If dad is a fisherman, 80 percent of sons and 62 percent of daughters fish. If mom fishes, 75 percent of sons fish and 71 percent of daughters

Like a lead-headed jig dropped over the side of the boat, participation in fishing has been sinking, here in Pennsylvania and across the country.

According to Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation statistics, roughly eight million people took up fishing for the first time in 2010. But more than 10 million dropped out of the sport.

Pennsylvania is part of that "leaky bucket." License sales here are down by about 33 percent since 1990, and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission expects to sell only about 800,000 this year, fewer than in any other since 1970.

"No matter how you look at the data, the picture isn't pretty," Carl Richardson, director of the commission's outreach and education section, told members of the Senate game and fisheries committee at a hearing in Harrisburg on Tuesday.

The commission relies on license sales for the majority of its annual revenue, so "that's got lots of ramifications for us," said Timothy Schaeffer, director of the commission's bureau of policy, planning and communications.

But the commission has a plan.

It's pushing Senate Bill 1049, which would give the agency authority to sell multiyear licenses allowing anglers

to fish for three to five years. That would benefit anglers in terms of convenience, said Bernie Matscavage, director of the commission's bureau of administration. It also would save them about \$14 in transaction fees, he added.

But the bill's real value is that it would bring more federal revenue to the commission, Schaeffer told members of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs at their fall convention in Camp Hill.

The commission gets funding each year from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service based on how many licenses it sells, he said. The problem is that amount is not consistent, because fishermen drop in and out of the sport with greater frequency than anyone ever thought, he said. Only 8.5 percent of anglers bought a license from 2006 to 2010, for example.

That means more than 90 percent of anglers come and go to some degree.

"It's crazy, how high these numbers are," Schaeffer said. "What we'd like to do is smooth that out, slow down that bleed."

If the commission sold a five-year license to an angler who might otherwise drop in and out of the sport -- because of time constraints, bad weather and other factors - it would get five years of federal revenue, regardless of whether that person fished each year or only one. The importance of that can't be understated, said John Arway, executive director of the commission.

"It's very important for us to encourage license sales, because that drives money back to us to pay for fishing, boating and conservation," Arway said.

The Federation and the Pennsylvania Council of Trout Unlimited testified in support of the bill at Tuesday's hearing.

Three other states -- Kansas, Georgia and Florida -- have begun experimenting with multiyear licenses. Commission officials - who said a survey on their own web site indicates 70 percent of Keystone State fishermen say they'd be interested in a multiyear license, with a three-year license most preferred - want to try next.

Sen. Richard Kasunic, a Fayette County Democrat and Sen. Richard Alloway, the Adams County Republican who chairs the committee, want to offer that chance. They said they'll be working to convince their fellow legislators to pass their bill "as soon as possible."

"It's critical to provide opportunities for people to enjoy Pennsylvania's outdoors, youngsters, adults, people who may have fished in the past and given it up, and that's what we're trying to do here," Kasunic said

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