

Valley Angler

Fish and Game in Crises Part Two

By Bill Thompson

In last weeks column I discussed the two proposals that the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department has put forth as a stop gap measure in order to provide adequate funding for the coming year. There have also been several proposals made to provide long term funding for the department.

As I mentioned in last weeks column all funding for the department comes from license fees from hunters and fishermen. Unfortunately the numbers of hunters and fishermen are declining at a rapid rate resulting in less funding. At the same time the department has been charged with additional duties not related to hunting and fishing. In the past the department has responded by simply raising license fees. The department (and I think most hunters and anglers would agree) feels that this type of funding has reached its limits. New Hampshire now has the distinction of being the state with the highest license fees in New England. It would seem that at this point in time it is only logical that those who benefit from the efforts of Fish & Game and do not purchase licenses should in some way bear part of the financial burden.

One proposal is to place a registration fee on non- motorized boats. On the surface this idea seems to have merit, however there are some draw backs. In the past couple of years there has been a huge increase in kayaking and canoeing in general. One only has to look at the increase in traffic on the Saco River to see the effects. As it stands now the paddling community is not contributing in any way to Fish & Game while at the same time deriving a great deal of benefit from the department.

The problem I have with this proposal is; what constitutes a non-motorized water craft? Will the legislation include float tubes, personal pontoon boats? In all honesty I have not seen anything in writing detailing this. What concerns me is that a great many fishermen own several different types of water craft. In my own case, I own two canoes, two pontoon boats and two float tubes, at ten dollars per boat that would come to sixty bucks a year. In an informal poll of fellow anglers I am not alone in this as many of them are multi boat owners. If you think that float tubes would not be included in this let me point out that the Federal Government already does and float tubes must be registered as boats in all national parks. This means that a fee is charged and the user must be wearing a PFD.

I sincerely feel that this proposal will have little chance of passing through the New Hampshire House and Senate. I doubt that hunters and fishermen will have little to say about it, but canoe and kayak owners will raise the roof. To begin with they are probably more organized than sportsmen and there are more of them. The canoe industry will surely come out strongly against it. I am sure that canoe rental outfits will see little humor in this proposal and will strongly lobby their representatives to vote against it. As any

hunter/fishermen can tell you we all pay a federal tax on manufactured hunting and fishing gear. There was once a serious effort by the Federal Government to include canoes under this act. The canoe industry was vehemently opposed to it and were successful in defeating it. I see the same result happening here as well.

Personally, if there was some clear definition limiting the registration to canoes and kayaks I might be willing to go along; I think I might be able to come up with the extra twenty bucks to register the canoes. However, if they include all other water craft, like float tubes, then I have a problem.

Another proposal is to require a fishing license for salt water fishing. The only real problem here is that once again it is the sportsmen that bears the burden. There are a few states that already have salt water licenses; Florida is one. I remember when this was first proposed and the big objection there was that a great many people who lived there depended on fishing as a food source. I am sure in a state the size of Florida there was some truth to that. However, I tend to doubt that is the case here in New Hampshire. If I remember right the fee in Florida is five dollars. If we were to keep our fee at five bucks and charged resident and non-resident alike the same fee I don't think that I personally would object to much. Charging more, I feel would only turn people away. Lets face it we don't have a lot of coast line and without a boat access is rather limited. Much of New Hampshire's coast line is private or owned by the State where a fee is already charged most of the time. Even when you can find beach access parking is often an issue. It is just as easy for residents and non-residents to go to Maine or Massachusetts. In my own case I already spend more of my salt water fishing time in those states. I do think that the general consensus among fishermen is that we could probably live with a salt water license and I fully expect this to get a green light.

One last proposal that has been advanced is to place the Fish and Game Department under the jurisdiction of another department in the state. There is absolutely no question in my mind that this would be a disaster. As with each of these proposals I strongly urge all sportsmen to contact you representatives and voice your opinion. There is too much at stake here and our future depends on what happens to our Fish and Game Department.

See you on the river.