

# DNR drops fee-increase proposal

By James Q. Lynch

Journal Des Moines Bureau | Posted: Monday, February 02, 2009

DES MOINES n Citing weakened economic conditions, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources has yanked its proposal to raise hunting, fishing and trapping fees from the legislative agenda.

That comes less than a week after Gov. Chet Culver shot down the idea, saying it ran afoul of his promise not to raise taxes while Iowans are facing a recession.

"NO, that is not in my budget," he said emphatically when asked about the proposed \$6 hike in hunting and fishing license fees. Departments "are coming up with ideas they recommend to balance the budget, but I do not believe that will pass the Legislature."

The fees paid by hunters, anglers and trappers are not taxes but user fees paid to the constitutionally protected Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund. However, DNR Director Rich Leopold said Monday the department would "wait for some friendlier economic climate to talk about this."

The impact of postponing action on the fee increases should be negligible this year, Leopold said, but conceded if fees are raised next year Iowans are likely to see a lower level of service from the DNR.

House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Paul Bell, D-Newton, wasn't as optimistic as Leopold.

"Somewhere something is going to suffer," Bell said, noting the department's budget has been cut 1.5 percent this year and is facing a 6.5 percent cut next year. That's on top of costs associated with flood damage. "You can't take 6 to 8 percent out of your budget and not feel it."

Although hunting and fishing license fees have not been raised in seven years, the proposal was the victim of the "fate of bad timing," Leopold said on "The Exchange" on Iowa Public Radio.

"Of course, no one wants to pay more, ever, for anything. I understand that," Leopold said. "At same time, we recognize hunting and fishing are perhaps even more important during an economic downturn, so we want to keep it accessible."

Many stakeholders n Ducks Unlimited, Pheasant Forever and deer hunting groups, for example n backed the increase, Bell said. For enthusiasts, an additional \$6 "is not a lot for those things they have a passion for," Bell said. Casual hunters and anglers might balk, however.

In spite of the support of hunters and anglers, Bell expected the proposed increase to run into opposition from lawmakers, many who share the governor's reluctance to raise fees or taxes this year.

"Even a nominal increase would be difficult at this time," Bell said, "so I'm happy to see it delayed."

He doubts the prospect for a fee increase will be better next year. "I don't anticipate the economy being any better," Bell said. "It could get worse."

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