

Calif. sporting groups leery of dept. name change

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press News Fuze

Posted:

ContraCostaTimes.com

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—After six decades as the California Department of Fish and Game, the agency in charge of the state's wild animals has a new name—one that has many hunting and fishing organizations leery.

Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation recently replacing "Game" with "Wildlife," in a nod to environmentalists and animal-rights activists. Sporting groups fear the legislation signals a change in the department's traditional focus.

"Generally, that means a shift toward butterflies, endangered species and other stuff like that," said Mike Faw, spokesman for the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, an Ohio-based advocacy group that has seen similar efforts in other states.

Once the name change takes effect Jan. 1, only 12 other states will use the word "game" in the names of their wildlife agencies.

The name change grew out of a two-year effort to develop a strategic vision for the department. Hunting and fishing organizations say they didn't feel they were adequately represented during the department's makeover, which supporters say better reflects California's changing political and demographic landscape.

"We were outnumbered, there's no question about it," said Bill Gaines, president of the California Outdoor Heritage Alliance.

His organization was one of four representing hunters on the department's 51-member "stakeholder advisory group." Another six organizations represented recreational and commercial fishermen.

The name change "was far from a consensus, I can tell you that," Gaines said. "I think that what the proponents wanted to do was send a signal that we're changing the foundation of the Department of Fish and Game—and that's hunting and fishing."

Brown signed the name-change bill last week as he also approved a California ban on the centuries-old practice of using hounds to hunt bears and bobcats. It was a double blow for Josh Brones, president of California Houndsmen for Conservation.

"There's less of an appreciation for a rural way of life," Brones said. "We're moving more from rural to urban and from conservative to liberal."

Money from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses has generated hundreds of millions of dollars for the department over the decades and has gone to land purchases, species rehabilitation, habitat restoration and other programs.

Department spokesman Mike Taugher said the name change came from the Legislature, not his agency. Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, who included the name change in AB2402, said it came from the department's advisory groups.

Both said the name change will not imperil hunting and fishing, even as expectations for the department's mission have grown to include habitat conservation and protecting endangered species.

"This department's been around under the same brand for over 100 years," Huffman said. "The resources of the department have not kept pace with its mission, which has become very broad. The trend not just in California but in the United States has been away from managing only for hunting and fishing, and managing broadly in a way that includes hunting and fishing."

The bill also beefs up the department's law enforcement role and its use of science to guide policies that will be designed to protect entire ecosystems instead of individual species. It also allows it to increase and broaden its collection of fees beyond the money raised through hunting and fishing licenses.

Huffman's legislation, which does not change the name of the regulatory California Fish and Game Commission, was one of several bills signed by the governor that supporters say will modernize a department that traces its origins to Spanish and Mexican laws enacted before California became a state. Brown also approved SB1249 by Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, which will let the department contract with nonprofit conservation groups to manage state-owned lands and charge fees for using more of its properties.

California created the nation's first fish commission in 1870, expanded it to include game in 1878, added a Division of Fish and Game in 1927 and elevated it to the Department of Fish and Game in 1951.

California had been one of 13 states to include "game" in the name of the agency overseeing wildlife issues, according to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Eighteen states use "wildlife," while the others generally use "natural resources" or "conservation." The trend recently seems to have accelerated, according to the association and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"The department's name says a lot about its mission. We do believe there has been a shift, and it has come at the expense of those who hunt and fish," said Marko Mlikotin, executive director of the California Association for Recreational Fishing.

He said the money to change the name would better be spent easing the state's lingering budget deficit.

Taughner said the department projects the name change will cost more than the Legislature's upper estimate of \$300,000, mostly to redo the department's website and computer systems. The current letterhead, uniforms, license forms, vehicle logos and other remnants will be used until they're exhausted, he said, then replaced in the normal cost of doing business.

Wendy Hopkins, spokeswoman for Ducks Unlimited in nine western states, said her organization does not believe the department's evolving mission will undermine waterfowl hunting. Organizations such as hers said they believe there are enough protections built into state law to prevent the money raised through hunting and fishing licenses from being siphoned off for other needs.

Huffman also authored the 2010 bill that prompted the department to re-evaluate its role and responsibilities. He said it's natural for sporting groups to be nervous about the change.

"I think people will just have to bear with us and have this play out over time," Huffman said. "I am very confident this is going to be good not only for hunting and fishing but for all aspects of the department's mission."