

Wildlife chief floats changes in license fees

BY WILL SENTELL

License fees for basic fishing would rise by 42 percent and 33 percent for hunters under a proposal outlined Monday by the secretary for the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Jack Montoucet, a former state legislator who leads the agency, said the increases are needed to offset a wide range of financial problems, including the loss of \$65 million since 2009 because of state budget problems.

Montoucet said the plan, the first of its kind since 2000, would also trim the number of licenses from 117 to 30 and bring charges in line with neighboring states.

The effort would have to be approved by the Legislature.

"Certainly it is going to be an uphill battle," Montoucet told the Press Club of Baton Rouge.

"We understand that," he said. "But what we are trying to do is put that information out there so that our Legislature can be educated as to what we are facing."

The overhaul will be debated during the regular session, which begins March 12. Rep. Jerome Zeringue, R-Houma, is expected to sponsor the legislation.

The state has about 709,000 licensed fishermen - nearly one in five eligible residents - and about 326,000 licensed hunters, including 92,000 deer hunters.

Under Montoucet's proposal, the cost of a basic fishing license for residents would rise from \$9.50 to \$13.50 for a year. A basic hunting license would go up from \$15 to \$20.

Officials said they hoped to keep fee hikes below the 36 percent rise in inflation since the fees were last boosted.

Any proposed fee hike is sure to spark arguments amid recurring state budget problems.

The Legislature is in a special session to try to avoid a roughly \$1 billion shortfall for state services starting July 1. "It is never a

good time to look at fees," said Cole T. Garrett, legislative liaison for the department, who joined Montoucet for the presentation.

Garrett said the new fees would raise another \$10 million to about \$30.3 million per year. The agency does not get state general revenue dollars.

It is financed with user fees, revenue from 1.5 million acres of land managed by wildlife officials, and federal dollars.

The fee boost would also generate another \$1.4 million in federal funds, officials said.

The \$65 million lost by the department since 2009 stems from fund sweeps to help cover state financial shortages.

Montoucet said trimming the number of different kinds of licenses would benefit hunters and fishermen. "We need to shrink these, we need to consolidate," he said of the list of licenses. "We need to make it simpler for people coming in to buy licenses."

Under current rules, freshwater fishermen can get six different licenses, including basic, \$9.50; recreational wire nets, \$20; and crawfish traps, \$15.

Under the proposal, those and others would be listed as a single basic fishing license, \$13.50.

Youngsters would be required to have a \$5 license if they hunt deer, turkey or take part in any department youth lottery hunt.

A lifetime hunting and fishing license would cost \$1,000 for residents and \$5,000 for nonresidents.

Crab trap fishermen now have three options for a license: basic, \$9.50, crab trap license, \$15; and saltwater fishing license, \$13.

Those would be replaced by a stand-alone crab license - \$5.

Hunters and fishermen 65 years and older would continue to get price breaks.

In some cases, fees would drop.

The charge for a "Sportsman's Paradise" license, which covers hunting and fishing charges, would drop to \$90 per year from \$100.

Montoucet said that, if the proposed recreational fee hikes win approval, he will seek higher charges for commercial fishing in 2019.

Commercial revenue accounts for about \$3 million of annual department revenue.

Montoucet, former president of the Louisiana Alligator Association, said without a fee hike the agency will eventually have to lay off law enforcement agents and biologists.