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Article published Mar 7, 2007

Fish and Game director explains choice to retire  
He says reason was not budget conflict

The Associated Press

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Mar 7, 2007

The head of the state's struggling Fish and Game Department, Lee Perry, says he is retiring because of family considerations - not tensions with Gov. John Lynch over his agency's budget.

The agency historically supports itself through hunting and fishing license fees and matching federal grants; the fee income has been in a long decline.

The department faces major cuts starting July 1 if it doesn't get money from the state's general fund, according to Perry and the Fish and Game Commission, the policy-setting body. Lynch has not included the money in his proposed budget.

But Perry, 62, said he isn't leaving because of budget issues.

"I've been in this business for 40 years," he told The Telegraph of Nashua. "This seemed the appropriate time to finish up and return to the Southwest, where many in my family already are."

Perry, who led Maine's Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Department before coming to New Hampshire, spent 14 years working in Arizona. His four-year term in New Hampshire ends Aug. 13.

"This is something my wife and I have been planning to do," he said. "I was reluctant to make any announcement because it could take the focus off the department's task of balancing this budget."

Lynch spokesman Colin Manning said the governor thanked Perry for his service.

When Perry came to Fish and Game, the department was starting to dip into a rainy-day fund to pay for continuing operations. Now, the well has run dry, and Perry says the department needs \$1.6 million in state money in each of the next two years as a stopgap measure to avoid laying off one-quarter of its full- and part-time staff and closing several regional offices and fish hatcheries.

The department also is seeking a dedicated portion of the rooms-and-meals tax for more reliable, long-term funding, as well as new user fees on nonmotorized boats and from saltwater fishing licenses. Other states have similar funding streams.

Lynch insists the department does not need more funding, other than a proposal that would generate an additional \$250,000 a year and another that would cut spending by \$300,000 by shifting dam maintenance to a different state agency.

Some lawmakers and Lynch's office have criticized Perry for trying to drum up public support for more money instead of working closely with the governor's budget team and the Legislature on the next two-year budget.

"Fish and Game, at least in this round, chose to involve public relations efforts rather than negotiations with the governor's staff," said Rep. Marjorie Smith, chairwoman of the House Finance Committee.

However, other lawmakers have argued that the department provides vital services and should receive reliable funding, instead of having to beg the state for pennies. Perry also warned that Lynch's plan would result in the loss of federal matching money.

The Fish and Game Commission will screen candidates to replace Perry and make a recommendation to Lynch. Lynch's nominee then must be approved by the Executive Council.

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