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## **Wildlife budget battle continues: Fish and Game chief asks state Senate for help**

*Editor's note: The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, funded primarily by license fees, has for the first time requested state tax revenue to help close a budget shortfall. This is one in an occasional series examining the agency's budget crisis.*

CONCORD — Fish and Game chief Lee Perry, appearing before state senators on Friday, continued pushing for an increase in state funding for his agency, this time requesting roughly \$5 million over the 2008 to 2009 biennium.

He implored Finance Committee lawmakers to budget another \$2.6 million for the biennium, money that would be in addition to \$2.6 million in extra funds the House already allocated.

His pitch is a revised version of an appeal that Gov. John Lynch and lawmakers already largely have rejected, and ultimately may represent a last stand before the final branch of state government that could approve his request.

Fish and Game is facing a funding shortfall — agency officials have said they'll have a roughly \$5 million deficit by the end of the 2008 to 2009 biennium.

Perry previously requested \$4.6 million annually from the state's rooms and meals tax to address the problem. Lawmakers declined. Perry then asked Gov. John Lynch to budget \$1.6 million annually for the agency from the state's general fund.

He did not, and House lawmakers also rejected most bills introduced this session to address the agency's funding problems. They did increase the agency's budget, but only by about \$1.25 million in 2008 and \$1.35 million in 2009.

Fish and Game's roughly \$27.4 million budget for 2008 and more than \$27.7 million for 2009 both already are less than its \$28.9 million budget for 2006. Perry's latest request is another attempt at a compromise figure.

Perry said the Fish and Game account, which consists of revenue from hunting and fishing license fees, will provide \$11.4 million for the 2008 budget and \$11.6 million for the 2009 budget. The rest of the budget comes from matching federal funds and a variety of other fees.

Fish and Game officials said Friday that they'll have to cut key services such as searches and rescues and off-road vehicle programs unless lawmakers give the state agency at least the extra \$2.6 million.

"We need your help in finding a solution," Perry said.

Other services he said the agency may have to cut included fish stocking programs, wildlife biology work, conservation efforts and law enforcement.

"We cut expenses and used other available funding sources whenever possible. We have delayed filling positions and asked remaining employees to cover the gaps," he told the Senate panel. "Every department has stretched its dollars by involving partner organizations and volunteers and accepting donations of money and material."

Fish and Game officials also have said they may need to cut up to 28 full- and part-time positions and close some fish hatcheries unless they get an adequate infusion of state revenue.

The Senate now is reviewing the state budget, which includes Fish and Game's.

Perry said most of the funding the House approved for Fish and Game will cover two items: the \$720,000 per year Fish and Game pays to the state's information technology department and the cost of health insurance benefits for Fish and Game retirees, which Perry called the agency's largest expense.

One House bill sought to save administrative costs by combining several agency wildlife management accounts used for conservation efforts.

Sen. Harold Janeway, D-Webster, the panel's vice chairman, asked Perry how having a single game management account would help.

Perry said he couldn't predict how much money the change would save.

Sen. John Gallus, R-Berlin, also asked about a \$600,000 line item for Fish and Game's public boating access account.

Dan Lynch, assistant fish and game director, said the money provides matching funds to help the agency pay for new public boat access sites and maintain existing sites. He said the agency also has used the funds to help cities and towns repair and refurbish existing municipal boat access sites.

Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, D-Manchester, the committee's chairman, asked Lynch how the state benefits from entering into 30-year leases with municipalities for boat launch sites instead of having the state buy them.

"It saves us, the state and the department, the cost of acquiring land," Lynch said. "It has no bearing on the Fish and Game fund."

Fish and Game is required to maintain the boat access sites.

Lynch said boater registration fees pay for the public access program along with matching federal funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Sport Fish Restoration Program.

D'Allesandro said he and other members of the Senate panel would meet with Perry and his staff in the next few weeks to discuss Fish and Game's budget.

Perry after the hearing said he's optimistic the Senate would help the agency get an immediate \$1.3 million annually in stopgap funding.

He also said he hopes the Legislature will come up with a long-term financial solution after the results of a legislative audit of the agency are finalized this fall.

Gallus said he wants to see Fish and Game get the funding it immediately needs. "They are in a cash crunch," he said. "I want to make sure they are whole at the end of the day."

Perry said he will retire this summer after working in the fish and wildlife field for 40 years. The Fish and Game Commission's deadline for applications for his replacement was Friday.

He said he believes his successor will have to keep working with lawmakers to come up with new ways to fund fish and wildlife conservation in New Hampshire.

"Somebody's going to have to keep working on this problem, because it's not going to go away," he said.

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