

Frequently Asked Questions: Proposed Hunting, Fishing and Public Land Access Fee Structure

Why is TWRA increasing license fees?

The cost of managing wildlife and habitat has increased dramatically in recent years – everything from fuel to fertilizer is more expensive than ever before. One ton of fish food that could be purchased for \$700 in 2004 now costs the TWRA \$2,000!

The Consumer Price Index (which tracks the general cost of goods and services nationally) is up more than 20 percent over the last decade, and Tennessee has long maintained some of the best and most diverse hunting and fishing opportunities in the nation without continually raising license fees.

Our mission is to manage our state's natural resources for the benefit of all Tennesseans, and our focus is on doing it as efficiently and effectively as possible. Even with a reduction in employees and implementation of cost-saving programs, we are unable to continue funding the programs at the current level.

Unforeseen crises, such as the global Recession, the major floods of 2010 and 2011, and changes to federal funding regulations have strained resources on an unprecedented level over the past 10 years. Yet still we enjoy some of the greatest public land and hunting and fishing to be found anywhere in America.

When was the last time the fees were increased?

It has been a decade since Tennessee hunting and fishing license fees saw an increase, and prior to that, a fee change had not been sought by TWRA for 15 years.

Every dollar generated by licenses is utilized for the benefit of our wildlife and fisheries, so that Tennesseans have an opportunity to enjoy the incredible natural resources owned by all of us.

That includes everything from ensuring access to more than a million acres of high quality public lands to enforcing wildlife laws that ensure healthy, sustainable game and fish populations for the future.

How much will costs increase?

The proposed license package and fee increase will allow TWRA to balance the existing budget, and the percentage change on existing fees is based on the increase of the Consumer Price Index over the last 10 years. As a point of reference, the change to the Type 01 Annual Resident Hunting and Fishing license would be \$6 – or about the price of a box of shotgun shells for the skeet range.

TWRA is also planning to incorporate new user groups as contributors.

It's worth noting that this is the smallest increase in the Agency's 65-year history: the last fee structure change (in 2005) represented more than a 35 percent increase

over the previous change (1990). This is only the second time in 25 years that TWRA has had to increase license fees for hunters and fishermen.

What other changes are included in the proposal?

In many ways, Tennessee is a national success story: fish and wildlife that were once nearly extinct or no longer found in the state are now thriving here, both on land and in the water... and that includes non-game species.

Meanwhile, the habitat that they rely on is shrinking at an alarming rate. As a result, TWRA has implemented a new strategic plan that shifts the focus from species recovery to habitat management, working to ensure that we provide suitable habitat so that the fish and wildlife of our state can continue to thrive.

As part of that strategic shift in approach, Tennessee hunters and fishermen – while generating the vast majority of funding – would no longer bear the cost exclusively. A Wildlife Management Area user fee for high-impact groups would be incorporated, for example, and non-resident licenses would be adjusted to seek additional revenue from those who live outside the state but travel here to utilize our world-class resources.

Additionally, professional hunting and fishing guides who make a living on the public's resources will also be included under the proposed license structure, as will recreational shooters at state-owned and operated firing ranges.

To view the proposed fee structure, please visit tnwildlife.org.

Why can't you just cut costs, or ask for additional funding through tax revenues?

TWRA is a self-funding agency, meaning that license fees, boat registration fees, and federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing products essentially make up the entire annual budget. The Agency has cut costs and expenses where possible, but further cuts will result in a reduction in the services we have historically provided.

Salaries and benefits are a large portion of the Agency's budget, and while TWRA employs 46 fewer employees than it did in 2008, the cost of an employee today – from prevailing wages to health insurance – has obviously increased. TWRA employees in wildlife-related positions are currently paid less, on average, than their peers in bordering states.

Are other users besides hunters and fishermen contributing anything?

Historically, sportsmen and women have “paid the freight” for the general public, by single-handedly generating the funds that have restored countless species and conserved and maintained their habitat. All people who enjoy access to public land and wildlife have been the beneficiaries.

Non-hunting/fishing groups, such as horseback, off-highway vehicle and mountain bike riders who have a significant ongoing impact on the terrain of public areas, would now be required to contribute on a reasonable level.

Our guiding principle is to accommodate as many uses as possible, while spreading the program costs across all of the user groups in an equitable manner, and allowing individuals to better tailor their license purchases to specific activities.

What do you plan to do with the additional funds?

Let's be clear: the revenues generated from license fees, boat registrations and federal excise taxes on equipment vary as a result of countless natural and man-made factors, while the Agency's budget remains essentially fixed over time. Inflation and other cost increases ultimately create a scenario where the revenues don't cover the expenses, and either fees have to be increased or programs have to be cut.

This proposal is designed to generate additional revenues to continue funding Agency programs at current levels, and to ensure that the nationally recognized work of our state's wildlife agency can continue without any negative impact on the public or its resources.

Will this fee structure allow TWRA to continue providing the programs and services that Tennesseans have come to expect?

This is only the second time that TWRA has sought a license increase in 25 years, and a step that we have staved off for as long as possible. However, the economic realities are undeniable, and without this new fee structure, programs and services would have to be cut.

Every aspect of the budget is reviewed each year, both internally and by the Tennessee Fish and Wildlife Commission, and cost-saving measures are implemented wherever possible, even throughout the year.

We want every Tennessean to have an opportunity to enjoy our wildlife and wild places, and that means it must be affordable.

What does the approval process look like?

The Tennessee Fish & Wildlife Commission governs these licenses and fees, and will consider this proposed license and fee structure in January.

The Joint Government Operations Committee of the Tennessee General Assembly will also review the proposal in the first quarter of 2015.

When is the increase scheduled to go into effect?

If passed by the Tennessee Fish & Wildlife Commission in January, the new fee structure would not go into effect until July 1. However, the 2015 licenses will be

available in mid-February and may be purchased at the current price until the new fees become effective on July 1.