

SUBJECT: State parklands passports for seniors; youth, senior fishing licenses

COMMITTEE: State Recreational Resources — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 6 ayes — Kuempel, Siebert, Black, Oakley, B. Turner, Woolley

1 nay — Rabuck

1 present, not voting — Hightower

1 absent — Horn

WITNESSES: For — None

Against — None

On — Jim Dickinson, Ron Holliday, Andrew Sansom, Jim Riggs, Paul Israel, Jayna Burgdorf, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

BACKGROUND: Persons 65 years old or older are eligible to receive a state parklands passport from the Parks and Wildlife Department allowing them to enter state parks without paying an entrance or admissions fee.

DIGEST: **State parklands passport.** CSHB 1785 would require Texas residents who turn 65 after August 31, 1995, and acquire a state parklands passport to pay 50 percent of the regular park entrance or admission fee. Persons who are 65 years old or older before September 1, 1995, would continue to qualify for a passport that gives them free admission and entrance into parks. Passports issued to those who turn 65 after August 31, 1995, would be available only to residents who had lived in Texas for six months before applying for pass, are a member of the U.S. military on active duty in Texas or any other individual in a category that the commission designates as residents.

Fishing license. CSHB 1785 would eliminate the current exemption from the fishing license requirement for persons under 17 years old and persons who turn 65 years old after August 31, 1995. State residents who are at least 65 years old by September 1, 1995, would be grandfathered and not

be required to have a license. Non residents who are at least 65 years old by August 31, 1995, would be exempt if their state grants a similar exemption to Texas residents.

CSHB 1785 would restrict the Parks and Wildlife Commission's authority to set lower license fees or waive fees for certain categories of persons (those with commercial fishing licenses, blind and disabled vets) to apply only to Texas *residents* in those categories. The Parks and Wildlife Commission would be authorized to set a lower fee or waive the fee for residents under 17 years old and persons age 65 or older. The commission would be given authority to waive license requirements for the all of the categories.

CSHB 1785 would replace the current 50-cent fee paid to persons who collect license fees and issue licenses with authority for the commission to establish collection and issuance fees for fishing licenses and tags.

CSHB 1785 would take effect September 1, 1995.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 1785 would recognize that seniors and youths should pay a portion of the costs of supporting state parks, but would not subject them to the full fees charged to others. As the commission moves toward self-funding, it is important that it be given authority to set necessary fees. The changes made in this bill for fees charged to seniors would be consistent with practices of private-sector businesses that give seniors services or products for a reduced fee, but not for free.

State parklands passport. Senior citizens should be given a break on park admission fees but should not gain entrance for free. It is important that seniors — like other Texans — pay a portion of the costs to maintain state parks. Because the use of state parks by seniors is increasing and their impact on resources can be significant, they should pay a minimal fee, especially when much of the state parks infrastructure is in need of repair. Half-price admission to parks would generally be around \$4, which would be affordable to seniors who often have a lot of disposal income.

Parks and Wildlife surveyed its passport holders and found about 88 percent of residents would be willing to pay half-price admission. HB

1785 would not result in a fee being charged to anyone currently eligible to enter the parks free, whether they currently have a passport or not. The half-price fee would apply only to persons turning 65 after August 31, 1995.

The fiscal note estimates that half-price admission for those who turn 65 after August 1995 would generate about \$400,000 to \$485,000 a year for Parks and Wildlife.

Non-residents should have to pay the standard fees to ensure they pay their fair share for managing resources that are supported by Texans.

Fishing licenses. Eliminating the current fishing license exemption for senior citizens and youths coupled with authority for the commission to set a lower license fee would allow these groups to pay a portion of the costs to preserve and manage fishing resources but not require them to pay the full fees. During a time when Parks and Wildlife's resources are stretched to the limit it is reasonable to ask youths and seniors to pay a portion of the fee charged others so that resources can be properly managed and preserved for all Texans. This authority would be consistent with the commission's authority to set most user fees. The reduced fee could be set at around \$5, low enough so it would not restrict access to fishing for seniors or youths. The commission would take into consideration the ability of youths and seniors to pay a license fee and would not set a prohibitive fee. Seniors who are at least 65 years old by August 31, 1995, would be grandfathered and not be affected by a fishing license fee.

Parks and Wildlife should be able to set lower fees or waive requirements only for state residents. Non-residents should have to pay the standard fees to ensure they pay their fair share for managing resources. The bill would include non-residents in any exemption or lower fee only if their state offers similar breaks for Texans.

The commission needs authority to waive license *requirements* so that persons exempt from the fee are not obligated to obtain a license.

The commission should be able to set the fee paid to persons who sell fishing licenses so that the fees can rise or fall as the license fees change.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

This bill would do nothing more than increase fees on senior citizens and youths, two groups with limited means who should be given a break so that state parks and fishing resources are accessible to them.

State parklands passport. Senior citizens should continue to be eligible for free entrance into state parks. Using state parks is a recreation that should not be limited for seniors, many of whom live on fixed incomes and have supported state parks throughout their lives.

Fishing licenses. Youths and seniors should continue to be exempt from fishing license fees. Seniors, many of whom have low incomes or on fixed incomes, should not be subject to fees that would increase the cost of fishing. Many seniors have supported state fishing resources throughout their lives should not be given a break when they become elderly. The impact of youths on fishing resources is usually light and so they should not be subject to a fee. Exempting youths from license fees encourages youths to become the adult fishers of tomorrow. If HB 1785 is enacted, youths who are as young as four or five years could have to obtain fishing licenses.

NOTES:

The committee substitute added the qualification that fishing license are not required of residents, instead of all persons, who are at least 65 years old by September 1, 1995, and eliminated authority found elsewhere in the code for the commission to establish lower fees or waive fees or license requirements for persons participating in Parks and Wildlife sponsored events.