

Recruitment and Retention of Fish and Game Wardens

The Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) game warden force, founded in 1871, was the first uniformed state law enforcement in California. The force bears substantial statewide responsibility, including protecting wildlife and its habitat, investigating pollution incidents affecting state waterways, homeland security and public safety, and is the smallest force per capita of any state or province in North America at only 385 peace officer positions. California has the greatest biodiversity of any state in the nation, and its precious resources are accessible to an ever-increasing population; yet their only protection is from a limited and continually dwindling game warden force.

Several factors contribute to the recruitment and retention challenges facing DFG's warden force including low pay (approximately 50 percent lower than a California Highway Patrol officer) and the resultant competition with higher-paying agencies for quality peace officer candidates, higher educational standards necessitated by the complexities and consequences of a game warden's duties, an extended POST-certified academy to prepare the officers to enforce all California laws and receive specialized training needed for wildlife investigation and protection (a new game warden functions as a detective). Game wardens have a particularly unique affinity for the outdoors and the protection of wildlife and habitat. For them it's not just a job, but a way of life. Yet, retention of game wardens is becoming more difficult due to the consistent pay disparity experienced by veteran wardens, even as they move up the ranks, and enticements by other state and local agencies that recognize DFG's investment in game warden training as some of the foremost law enforcement training in the country.

"Poaching for profit" is second only to the illegal drug trade in black market profitability, (more than \$100 million per year since the 1990s). It is the most compelling cause of an unprecedented increase in commercial poaching and the blatant disregard of wildlife laws over the last decade. It is readily acknowledged by stakeholders, constituents and members of the Legislature that the lack of game wardens and the ensuing inability to investigate and prosecute such violators has put the state's resources in crisis. The impact on recreational fishing and hunting opportunities, and conservation and restoration efforts is of significant concern to both consumptive and non-consumptive groups.

DFG is utilizing all of its resources to perform mission-critical work, and enforcement of fish and game laws is a priority task. Partnerships and compacts with local, state and federal enforcement agencies are helping support statewide resource protection efforts, and DFG's Law Enforcement Division continues to maximize all of its resources to address perpetual natural resource conservation challenges. DFG will further develop these partnerships, work cooperatively with stakeholders, constituency groups and the Legislature, and inform the Administration in order to increase game warden salary, benefits and positions to build and maintain a sufficient game warden force.