

User Fees and Program Funding

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) manages and operates, on behalf of the state, a number of programs and functions that directly serve a unique and specific constituency. In many cases, these programs are funded through one or more types of user fees that attempt to attribute the program costs to the user group or constituency directly served by the program. Hunting licenses generate approximately \$23 million annually for wildlife management programs while the estimated sale of fishing licenses generates \$66.2 million annually for management and development of fishing programs. Examples of application fees administered by DFG include the Lake and Streambed Alteration program, environmental document review, and fees for DFG participation in certain specialized environmental assessment and review programs. Of the nearly 300 different fees charged by DFG, the bulk are set by the Legislature. Some fees, such as private fish stocking permits, fishing tournament permits and permits for the standard importation of live aquatic species are set by the Fish and Game Commission. In addition to the fees noted above, DFG sets the fee for inspections of restricted species, and commercial salmon and halibut trawl vessel permits.

Utilizing fees to fund critical DFG programs has increased in recent decades in response to shrinking state budgets, gradual acceptance of the “fee for service” model for state government, and case law and policy that support the “user pay” approach to budgeting. In theory, user fees would pay for all elements of a particular program, including science and management activities, administration, program development, and program assessment and evaluation. In practice, however, user fees seldom cover the entire cost of a program, and DFG is often faced with making key priority decisions for fee expenditures that may not align with constituent expectations. In addition, legislatively established fees are often the result of negotiations between disparate interests, and result in fees designed to fund a particular program element or activity. This may also lead to conflicts with constituents and stakeholders when program delivery cannot meet expectations. During periods of strained state budgets, DFG often lacks the other resources to completely deliver programs and activities.

DFG has recently undertaken a process of examining the basis, efficacy, and sufficiency of fee-based programs and functions. DFG established a cross-function team to look at consistency issues (e.g. whether cost of living fee increases are applied equally across all fee programs), opportunities for combining or leveraging fee programs, and refining program scopes to better match the intent and definition of the fee program.