

Gov. Lynch backs off moose hunting permit

By TOM FAHEY
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CONCORD – Gov. John Lynch yesterday backed away from his idea of auctioning moose hunting permits to help balance the Fish and Game Department budget.

The plan to auction 50 permits a year would have raised a tiny percentage of the state budget, perhaps as much as \$500,000, but became one of the most controversial items in the \$10.2 billion spending package.

"I continue to believe the idea of a moose auction is worth considering, but I also realize there are concerns," Lynch said. "I am comfortable sending the issue to study if that's what legislators choose to do."

Critics said the plan amounted to an auction of state wildlife to the highest bidder.

Lynch said he has been in talks with Fish and Game officials to find other ways to balance the books there. They include a combination of cost-saving measures and ways to increase revenue.

The state Fish and Game commission this week voted to cut by 50 the number of moose permits it throws into an annual lottery as a way to offset any harm an auction might cause the state's herd.

Lynch said that no member of the commission had contacted him with concerns.

Fish and Game made 675 permits available last year through a lottery system.

Officials base the number of annual moose hunting permits on analysis of herd numbers and health, and on the number of hunters they expect to be successful.

Critics said Lynch's plan would disrupt that careful approach to herd management. Rep. Gene Chandler, R-Bartlett, protested the idea loudly almost as soon as Lynch finished describing it.

Yesterday he said he was relieved to hear Lynch has backed off.

"I applaud him for recognizing the perils of what he was proposing, and I also applaud the sportsmen of the state for stepping up and making their wishes clearly known €" that New Hampshire's wildlife aren't for sale," he said.

Chandler said: "From my perspective, a study is not going to do any good. Any study that would find an auction of even one permit would be wrong." He said the next step in the Legislature should be to find a way to close the budget gap at Fish and Game.

Chandler said one possibility would be to raise from \$10 to \$15 the fee hunters pay when they enter the moose lottery. Another would be to tap into some surpluses that have built up in wildlife management accounts.

The House Fish and Game Committee on Thursday recommended that a moose auction bill be killed. The move on a 6-5 vote makes even the study Lynch favors difficult to sell to the full House. The bill would set an annual auction of three permits, with a minimum \$5,000 bid for each.

Maine and Vermont also auction off moose hunting permits, but limit to five the number of permits up for bid. Financial results from those auctions throw doubt on budget assumptions Lynch made when he proposed the idea. He expected 50 permits to draw an average bid of \$5,000, raising \$250,000 a year.

While Maine and Vermont saw top bids exceed \$10,000 for the first few permits, the lowest bids in each state were for less than \$600. Neither state saw more than 20 bids. Combined proceeds in both states last year were \$155,000 on 30 bids.

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