

Fishing license receives tentative approval

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Fishing license receives tentative approval

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By Brad Rich

NEWS-TIMES

RALEIGH — After a debate the chief representative of the state's commercial fishermen called "very disturbing" the state House of Representatives narrowly voted Friday to concur with the Senate's version of a long-controversial bill to establish a saltwater recreational fishing license.

That 54-50 vote means the bill will be up for final approval in a third reading scheduled to take place when the House reconvenes at 7 p.m. Monday in the Legislative Building . If that vote is favorable, the bill will go to Gov. Mike Easley to sign into law.

Jerry Schill, president of the New Bern-based N.C. Fisheries Association (NCFA), the state's largest trade and lobbying group for commercial watermen, said he had been assured Thursday that the House would not take up the recreational license bill until Monday, so he left Raleigh and returned to New Bern late Thursday.

However, when the calendar was posted a few hours after he left, the bill was indeed on the list for Friday morning.

Mr. Schill said that when he found out about the change, he called state Rep. Mike Gorman, R-Craven, who said he, too, was on his way home to New Bern because he had received the same assurance.

According to Mr. Schill, Rep. Gorman said he would "check on" it but never got back in touch with the NCFA president.

As a result, Mr. Schill told the newspaper, he went back to Raleigh early Friday and was present for the House discussion, which lasted about 90 minutes. Rep. Gorman did not attend the session, a fact Mr. Schill called "very troubling."

"The debate on the bill was very disturbing, with several legislators who were opposing the rec license blaming commercial fishing for whatever ills North Carolina's fish stocks are suffering," Mr. Schill said Friday.

Rep. Robert Grady, (a Republican) from Onslow County, put the onus on the commercial fishermen

...who have nets that are miles long and catch everything,

Mr. Schill said.

"He said he has a friend in the business (who) told him he caught 14,000 pounds of fish at one time. Imagine that!"

In addition, Mr. Schill said Friday, Rep. Thomas Wright, D-New Hanover, blamed commercial fishing that occurred offshore.

"Keep in mind that both (Rep.) Grady and (Rep.) Wright are coastal legislators with some commercial fishing constituency.

"(But) the most enflaming anti-commercial fishing rhetoric was reserved for Rep. Bonner Stiller (Republican) from Brunswick County. He not only took on commercial fishing, but NCFA.

"He doesn't seem to like it because we're a special interest group that has had too much influence and now he's hoping the license will help the recreational folks have a seat at the table."

Mr. Schill continued, adding that (Rep. Stiller) specifically cited the state chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association, a recreational fishermen's group, as one of those "folks."

Also, Mr. Schill said, "Rep. Grady did correct (Rep. Stiller) to assure him that he (Rep. Grady)

wasn't taking sides of either NCFA or CCA, but was just opposed to the license out of concern for the millions of citizens who are not members of either group.

“But Rep. Stiller got his jabs at us while speaking in favor of the bill, and Reps. Grady and Wright got their swings in while speaking against the bill.

“It wasn't a good day for commercial fishermen in Raleigh,” Mr. Schill concluded.

“The lack of understanding of coastal issues in the General Assembly is immense, even with our coastal legislators,” Mr. Schill concluded. “There's no doubt we need to change some direction with our efforts in Raleigh!”

“During the relatively short debate in the Senate earlier in the week, the discussions centered on the bill. There were no negative comments noted toward the commercial fishermen.”

One member of the local legislative delegation, Rep. Jean Preston, R-Carteret, argued strongly against the license bill

She said that a family that rented a large house at the beach would have to go to the trouble of getting a license just to throw a line out into the surf for fun.

“It's just another way of taxing and taking away the right to fish in public waters,” she said.

Specifically, the bill would require that beginning Jan. 1, 2006, virtually all recreational fishermen 18 or older purchase a \$15-per-year license.

The bill would also establish a seven-day permit, which would cost \$1 and could be purchased only once in any 12-month period, primarily for tourists and one-time fishermen.

It would also set up a fee schedule for lifetime licenses and a subsistence license that would be issued free of charge to those who could prove they fall below the poverty level.

The license could be bought electronically. A fisherman need only give an officer his name and address.

Revenue from license sales would go into a North Carolina Saltwater Fishing Fund in the Office

of State Treasurer, who would invest the money.

Investment income would be allocated by a board composed of nine voting members
three each appointed by the governor, the speaker of the House and the president of the Senate
and two non-voting members, the director of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries and the chairman of the Marine Fisheries Commission, the policy-making arm of the division.

The money could be spent on fisheries habitat enhancement, such as oyster reef restoration, construction of artificial fishing reefs.

It could also be used to fund grants for fisheries research, acquisition of land for the enhancement of fishery habitat, beach access improvements and dredging to improve access to public fishing waters.

A small amount up to 2 percent or no more than \$1.25 million could be used for administration and operating expenses, but none of the money could go to the N.C. Marine Patrol, the law enforcement branch of the fisheries division.

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