

WILDLIFE - State has new game plan for agency



2011/FILE PHOTO

Department of Fish and Game spokesman Andrew Hughan stands at an artificial duck pond that was built in an area inhabited by an endangered plant just outside the state's San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

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2010/FILE PHOTO

Steve Schroeder, left, observes the examination of a brown bear by Department of Fish and Game wildlife biologist Kevin Brennan, right, after the bear was shot to death. The bear attacked Schroeder's dog in the Pioneertown area of San Bernardino County.

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Say so long to the California of Department Fish and Game and hello to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation this week that changes the name and clarifies the mission of the state governments stewards of wildlife and habitat. The agency has carried out the often conflicting roles of promoting fishing and hunting while also working to protect wildlife and habitat.

Effective Jan. 1, department employees must consider all the plants and animals that are that part the ecosystem as they manage Californias wildlife and wild lands.

The law makes mandatory the use of ecosystem-based management informed by credible science in all resource management decisions.

It calls for the formation of a science institute to guide the agencys policies and practices. And it forms an environmental crimes task force.

The new law will help the department do a better job as public trustees for the states fish and wildlife, said a statement from the office of Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, who sponsored of the legislation. Huffman did not respond to requests for an interview.

Fish and Game spokesman Mike Taugher described the new law as a huge change for the department.

We will certainly have to do a lot to prepare for this, Taugher said. But we havent started the process of implementation.

Fish and Games role dates to an 1852 decision to establish Californias first hunting seasons for elk, deer and certain game birds. The department now issues hunting licenses, enforces bag limits, stocks fish in lakes and streams, fights poaching, manages state preserves and oversees habitat preservation initiatives, among other duties.

Some environmentalist say the change will help modernized the department and spur reforms.

Tom Paulek worked as a wildlife biologist for the department for 28 years, including 17 years as manger of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area, before retiring in 2006.

Codifying an ecosystem-management approach will bring the department into the 21st century, said Paulek, an Idyllwild resident who is now active with an environmental and bird-watching group called Friends of Northern San Jacinto Valley.

The new law establishes a legal foundation that requires the department to better protect all of the states native plants and animals and their habitat, as well as game species, he said.

It will move the department away from practices that he says appear to favor the interests of hunters and anglers at the expense of non-game species, Paulek said.

For example, Fish and Game officials last year allowed a privately owned duck club to destroy habitat of an endangered plant called the San Jacinto Valley crownscale. Heavy equipment graded the plant habitat while rebuilding the clubs levees, ponds, blinds and a road on 92 acres next to the San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

Department staff could and should have protected the plants habitat, because the state had purchased a conservation easement on the land specifically to preserve the crownscale and other plants, Paulek said.

The department also lets hunters use lead shot in state-managed wildlife areas, even though lead is harmful to ecosystems, he said.

Since 1991, federal rules have banned lead shot when hunting migratory waterfowl because the pellets pollute soil and waterways and have been found to poison wildlife, including swans. But the state department allows lead shot for other game species, such as doves and rabbits, that fall under state jurisdiction.

Many hunters prefer lead shot over steel because it is heavier and thus more deadly. The new ecosystem approach could bring the departments policy into question, Paulek said.

Mark Searl, owner of BJ Sporting Goods in Hemet, said he enjoys quail, pheasant and deer hunting. He said he sees no problem with the name change and the shift toward a more science-based management of entire ecosystems.

Hunters are also environmentalists, Searl said. Its just you out there in the open space. You are close to God and you appreciate what he made.

But he opposes more regulations. States cutbacks have left too few wardens to enforce

laws against poaching and selling animals parts for commercial gain, he said. Gall bladders from California bears are still being sold in Asia, where some people believe they are a powerful aphrodisiac.

They can't enforce the laws they got now, Searl said.

Ileene Anderson, a biologist for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, said the new ecosystem approach may lead to changes in some of the departments past fish-stocking practices.

The center has criticized the agency over its century-old practice of releasing non-native hatchery fish in streams, lakes and rivers. The group contends that non-native rainbow trout have contributed to declines of native fish and other species, particularly amphibians such as the Cascades frog and long-toed salamander, which need fishless, high-mountain lakes to survive.

Anderson said she is encouraged by the new laws emphasis on protecting ecosystems.

It recognizes that California is internationally known hotbed of biodiversity, she said.