

The NM Legislature is now one week deep into their 60-day session. As of today, 289 pieces of legislation have been introduced. Legislators can continue introducing bills until February 20th, so we still have a very long way to go.

So far NMCOG is paying close attention to just three bills. Of course, we are also distantly paying attention to many more and we'll quickly add them to the "follow" list once they gain legs.

NMCOG IS ACTIVELY LOBBYING THE FOLLOWING BILL

SENATE BILL 5

WILDLIFE HERITAGE ACT (Currently being re-drafted to include amendments. We will attach a link to the bill once the language is updated)

BILL SPONSORS

Senators - [Peter Wirth](#) (D), [Pete Campos](#) (D), [Crystal Brantley](#) (R)
Representatives - [Matthew McQueen](#) (D)

NMCOG STANCE

Support as long as all our amendments remain intact

BILL SUMMARY

The Wildlife Heritage Act is a large bundle of policy change that would impact the hunting industry, and it deserves a thorough explanation. For being introduced just 4 days ago there is already an enormous amount of misinformation flying around social media as it relates to this bill. NMCOG would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight regarding the history of this bill, what it does (and doesn't do), and NMCOG's current stance.

First, a short lesson on the life cycle of a bill. Legislation, especially good legislation, takes years to pass (on average 6 years). The process typically goes something like this. A bill is introduced, and a bunch of lobbyists kill it. The next year the bill comes back with some amendments and a few less lobbyists kill it. This process happens over and over until the bill is amended such that the number of supporting lobbyists outweighs the number of opposing lobbyists. Then the bill finally passes. If the governor decides to sign it, it becomes law.

Back to the bill at hand, the genesis of the Wildlife Heritage Act goes way back to 2019 when Senator Steinborn introduced a bill to rename the game and fish. The bill was terrible and died in its first committee. Since then, the bill has returned year after year, dying each year but also becoming a little more palatable each year. NMCOG has always taken a hard opposition stance on this bill, until this year.

Wildlife related bills become CRAZY controversial in the NM Legislature. So over the interim, between the 2024 and 2025 sessions, Governor MLG specifically requested that all the groups involved collaborate to try and find middle ground. We did as we were told, and we had some knock down/drag out fights. This bill is the result of that process. It's not perfect, but it's not terrible!

This bill has 3 main prongs. First, the bill would reform the state game commission and reduce the governor's power to control commission appointments. It would allow for the majority leadership AND the minority leadership to play a role in commission appointments. And most importantly, it would require that all positions be filled by an individual with knowledge of hunting and fishing (sounds obvious but is surprisingly lacking in recent commissions). The bill would also require a licensed hunter to hold at least one seat on the commission (the current statute does not require any). And it would require the rancher position to be filled by someone in production agriculture with 2 types of "big game species", for which hunting licenses are sold, on their ranch (which is also not required currently). NMCOG has supported game commission reform for years. This is a needed change, and the language is favorable to the hunting and fishing industry.

The second prong is Department reform. Which is the prong that we are least crazy about, but the bill has come mountains from where it was in 2019. The current bill would change the name of the NMDGF to be the NM Wildlife Department. This is my (your lobbyist – Kerrie) personal least favorite part of the bill. I think it's unnecessary. I think it throws 100 years of brand recognition down the toilet. And I think it's a waste of money (although I am appreciative that this bill allows the rebrand to happen slowly through asset depreciation rather than all at once). However, there are many groups who want the "game and fish" to change to "wildlife" for the simple fact that the agency also works to conserve nongame species and not just game. I don't like it, but it is not a hill I am willing to die on.

Department reform would also include expanding the Department's purview. Meaning, its ability to conserve species. This bill would allow (but not mandate, thanks to several amendments) the Department to direct conservation efforts to any species. Currently the Dept. can work on listed species, or any species considered to be threatened or endangered. This change would allow the Dept. to study any species deemed necessary (but **does not** mandate it). This is an important amendment and one that was lacking from all previous drafts of the bill. This is the amendment that makes this section tolerable to the hunting industry. Without it, hunters and anglers would be mandated to pay for nongame species conservation. With it, the Dept. can simply conserve the non-game species their biologists deem necessary, and it will allow them to obtain funding from non-license fee revenue sources if they so choose.

Which leads to the third prong, funding. There is a license fee increase in this bill. The Department has needed to raise license fees for years. They have not had a license fee increase since 2006. They need the license fee increase to remain solvent and to pay for their existing conservation efforts. NMCOG continues to support a license fee increase and we were included in the negotiations regarding the change to non-resident licenses. In addition to the license fee increase, Representative Small (Chairman of House Appropriations) is attempting to allocate several million dollars from the general fund to help fund nongame conservation. Everyone knows several million doesn't go very far but remember nongame species conservation is no longer a mandate in this bill, so a little outside money for nongame species is better than none.

In a perfect world this bill would be three separate bills. But some groups (including NMCOG) want commission reform and license fee increase. While other groups want Department reform.

The Department reform groups will kill commission reform and license fee increase as stand-alone bills. And they know we would kill Department reform as a stand-alone. Thus is the crux of politics. And for the very small, handful of folks still reading this dissertation, you now understand why NMCOG's stance is more complicated than support or oppose.