

Bair and Moyle disregard the 'people's law'

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In 1938, Idaho voters passed an initiative, placing Fish and Game under an independent, nonpartisan commission. Winning 76 percent of the vote, it was Idaho's first successful initiative. Along with the Sunshine Law and the Homeowner's Initiative, it remains one of the premier examples of the "people's law."

Now two Idaho politicians - Senate Resources and Environment Committee Chairman Steve Bair, R-Blackfoot, and House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star - are behind a blatant power grab to undermine the voice of the voters.

In the process, Bair and Moyle would erase the egalitarianism that has been Fish and Game's legacy these past 78 years.

At issue is their bill directing Fish and Game to auction three tags each for controlled elk, deer and pronghorn hunts and one each for bighorn sheep, mountain goats and moose.

With the exemption of a single bighorn sheep hunt the state has auctioned - it got \$90,000 last year - Fish and Game has defended its tradition of giving everyone, resident and nonresident alike, an equal chance at winning a random drawing for a prized hunt in addition to the general elk and deer hunting seasons.

That's in stark contrast to other states - and nations - where hunting is a rich person's endeavor.

Apparently, Idaho lawmakers have had other ideas.

In 2012, they passed a bill strongly suggesting that Fish and Game jump in the auction business as a way to raise more cash.

Always struggling for money, the commission nevertheless declined to go along.

Two years later, the politicians tried another route.

Looking for a way to raise more dollars, Fish and Game proposed offering Idahoans a deal. If they maintained an active hunting and/or fishing license, they would avoid paying increased fees. Fish and Game called it a "price lock" bill.

Otherwise, price increases would kick in for the 2015 season.

The Legislature's counter offer was to allow landowners to sell the hunting tags they receive for providing big game habitat, institute auction tags and launch a bonus point system for controlled hunts. Those sportsmen willing to pay extra would have an inside shot at winning the prized hunts.

The commission withdrew its bill. With the economy recovering and more people returning to hunting and fishing, the agency managed to get by without a fee increase.

Now, Bair and Moyle are about to insist. No longer would the Fish and Game Commission have the option of auctioning off the hunts to the highest bidder.

Their bill would strip the commission of its discretion and mandate the auctions take place.

Imagine that - partisan politicians, not the duly appointed commissioners - changing the dynamic of Fish and Game's business model.

And don't be so sure the public supports this. True, one Fish and Game poll shows 55 percent of people who hunt and fish agree with the idea of auctioning tags to support wildlife management.

That is until you get specific. Asked about auctioning a dozen tags, a bare 51 percent would be willing to go along.

When the Bair-Moyle bill emerged, Fish and Game commissioners signaled they were about to discuss auctioning five prized hunts. At that point, reaction ran 75 percent against the move.

So the commission put the idea on hold until its March 8-10 meeting in Boise.

That leaves the ball in the Legislature's court, where the Bair-Moyle bill has been sitting in committee for three weeks.

But you can be certain of this much: If Bair and Moyle have their way, this won't stop with 12 auctioned tags.

Who is to say when the number might reach 100 or 500 or even 1,000 - with the best hunting opportunities Idaho has to offer becoming the exclusive province of those with the deepest pockets?

If politicians can transform the social contract of hunting and wildlife management in Idaho by institutionalizing privilege where none exists - and in the process enfeeble a Fish and Game Commission created by a vote of the people - what else will they try? - M.T.