

# Hunting for Revenues

## A Look at the State Fish and Wildlife Account

*By Jacob Anderson, Research Analyst, Forward Analytics*

As the weather warms, Wisconsinites look forward to getting outside. With over 15,000 lakes, 84,000 miles of rivers and streams, and nearly 17 million acres of forest land, Wisconsin provides ample opportunities to enjoy “the great outdoors.”

Beyond recreation, the outdoors is a major contributor to Wisconsin’s economy. A 2022 report from the state’s Office of Outdoor Recreation found that the outdoor economy contributed \$8.7 billion to Wisconsin’s gross domestic product in 2021. One of the biggest contributors was the boating and fishing industry, which includes commercial boat production, spending on fishing materials, and more. In 2021, this industry contributed \$602 million to the state gross domestic product.

However, maintaining the state’s wildlife and environmental resources for the enjoyment of residents and tourists requires thousands of hours of work by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and county officials. County Conservation Aids are just one example of joint efforts by the DNR and county governments to ensure residents can enjoy the outdoors. These funds provide financial assistance to county governments for projects such as prairie restoration, fish stocking and trail repairs. Completion of these projects helps the DNR fulfill its goal of maintaining Wisconsin’s outdoor recreation opportunities.

The state’s Fish and Wildlife Account, a part of the DNR’s Conservation Fund, provides much of the funding

for this work. Its primary revenue comes from user fees — the more than 1.5 million licenses, permits and stamps (“licenses”) purchased each year by residents and nonresidents to hunt and fish in the state.

In this Research Room, we provide a brief overview of Fish and Wildlife Account revenues, with a focus on licenses, and set the stage for future exploration of DNR user fees.

### ► Declining participation

A 2025 budget paper from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, a nonpartisan service agency of the Wisconsin Legislature, highlights two major trends in the Fish and Wildlife Account: license sales are decreasing and revenues are stagnant.

In fiscal year 2013-14, Wisconsinites purchased about 1.73 million licenses to hunt or fish. That number roughly translates to 30 purchases per 100 residents. By 2023-24, the most recent available data, that number fell by an average of 1.1% per year to about 1.54 million, or roughly 26 purchases per 100 people.

Nonresident purchases make up a smaller but still significant portion of Fish and Wildlife Account revenues. However, they have fallen in recent years as well. Between the 2013-14 and 2023-24 fiscal years, nonresident license sales fell by 5.2%, an average of 0.4% per year.

The decade-long decline in Wisconsin is particularly notable in that it runs counter to a broader national resurgence in hunting and fishing participation.

Every five years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts the “National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation” to measure various aspects of outdoor recreation. In 2022, the most recent survey data available, the Fish and Wildlife Service found that both the number of anglers and hunters grew. Specifically, between 2006 and 2022, the number of anglers grew 33.3% and the number of hunters grew 14.9%. In contrast, over the same period, the number of licenses purchased in Wisconsin decreased by 10.9% (see table below).

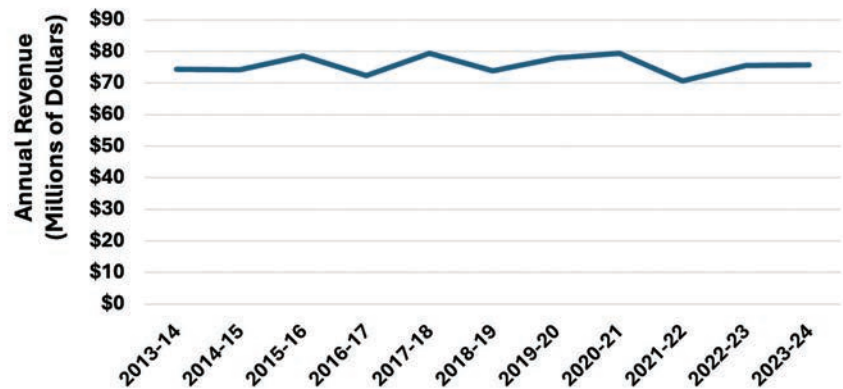
### ► Stagnant revenues

Another finding from the LFB’s 2025 budget paper is that the Fish and Wildlife Account’s revenues have been relatively flat for a little over a decade. Revenues have remained in the range of \$70-\$79 million, not accounting for transfers or federal funds (see chart above).

Stagnant revenues are, in part, due to declining license sales, especially since in some years, license sales comprise nearly half of all Fish and Wildlife Account revenues. With such a heavy reliance on hunting and fishing user

## Fish and Wildlife Account Revenue

FY 2013-14 to 2023-24



fees, the DNR may struggle to administer the programs supported by the account. In fact, there is already evidence of the Legislature addressing this shortfall. In the 2023-24 legislative session, the Legislature authorized a transfer of \$28 million from the Forestry Account, which is another portion of the Conservation Fund, to help cover expenditures in the Fish and Wildlife Account.

### ► Going forward

The Fish and Wildlife Account is vital to the state’s fishery and wildlife management, habitat restoration, and residents’ overall enjoyment of “the great outdoors.” It is also important to Wisconsin’s nature-based tourism. Each year, thousands of people outside of Wisconsin travel to enjoy the state’s outdoors. This influx of visitors generates millions of dollars for Wisconsin’s economy, making the Fish and Wildlife Account’s role economic and environmental. Thus, the account serves not only hunters and anglers, but people whose livelihood and leisure are tied to “the great outdoors.”

Balancing the resources needed to successfully administer and maintain the programs supported by the Fish and Wildlife Account while keeping Wisconsin’s fee levels competitive to attract outdoor recreation enthusiasts is an ongoing challenge that legislators will need to address. An exploration of the DNR’s current licensing system as it compares with other states will be a topic of future research by Forward Analytics. ■

*Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.*

## Wisconsin Resident License Sales

FY 2013-14 to 2023-24

Year	Amount	Per 100 Residents	Percent Change
2013-14	1,729,474	30	-
2014-15	1,723,306	30	-0.4%
2015-16	1,769,266	31	2.7%
2016-17	1,660,898	29	-6.1%
2017-18	1,648,779	29	-0.7%
2018-19	1,593,879	28	-3.3%
2019-20	1,678,682	30	5.3%
2020-21	1,627,873	28	-3.0%
2021-22	1,569,042	27	-3.6%
2022-23	1,567,020	27	-0.1%
2023-24	1,540,533	26	-1.7%
<b>Total Change</b>	<b>-188,941</b>	<b>-4</b>	<b>-10.9%</b>