

- SUBJECT:** Waiving hunting, fishing license fees for certain disabled veterans
- COMMITTEE:** Defense & Veterans' Affairs — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — S. King, Frank, Aycock, Blanco, Farias, Schaefer, Shaheen
0 nays
- WITNESSES:** For — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Jim Brennan, Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations)

Against — None

On — Justin Halvorsen, Parks and Wildlife Department; Kyle Mitchell, Texas Veterans Commission; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Michael Hobson, Parks and Wildlife Department)
- BACKGROUND:** Under Parks and Wildlife Code sec. 42.012, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission is required to waive the fee of a hunting license for a “qualified disabled veteran,” defined as a veteran who has a service connected disability consisting of the loss of the use of a lower extremity or a disability rating of 60 percent or greater and who is receiving federal compensation for the disability. The commission is also required to waive the fee for resident fishing license issued under Parks and Wildlife Code, sec. 46.004 to a qualified disabled veteran as defined under sec. 42.012.

Parks and Wildlife Code, ch. 50 authorizes the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to issue combination hunting and fishing licenses to Texas residents. The department offers “super combo” (type 502) hunting and fishing licenses free of charge to qualified disabled veterans.
- DIGEST:** HB 721 would reduce from 60 percent to 50 percent the disability rating required for a veteran to be considered a qualified disabled veteran for the purpose of receiving a resident hunting or fishing license fee waiver.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2015.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 721 would allow more disabled veterans to obtain hunting and fishing licenses at no cost. Too many disabled veterans are unable to take advantage of this benefit because the minimum threshold for a qualifying disability is too high. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department estimates that more than 1,000 Texas disabled veterans participate in hunting and fishing activities using licenses they paid for because they have a disability rating of 50 percent, not the 60 percent required for the free license.

The bill would simplify and make more consistent benefits that disabled veterans receive in Texas. For example, a veteran with a 50 percent disability rating is eligible for disabled veteran license plates but not to receive free admission into state parks, which currently requires a disability rating of 60 percent. HB 721 would reduce this inconsistency and confusion by lowering the disability threshold to 50 percent, which would make the department's fee waivers more closely reflect other related U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs service-connected disability benefits.

According to the Legislative Budget Board, the bill would have no significant fiscal implication to the state and would result in a minimal loss to the Parks and Wildlife Department's game, fish, and water safety account.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

While the service and sacrifice of disabled veterans should be honored, HB 721 would create a revenue loss for the Parks and Wildlife Department. The normal cost of a "super combo" license is \$68. According to TPWD figures, the overall cost of issuing additional free licenses to qualified disabled veterans under the bill would amount to more than \$170,000 per year.