

Senate Ways and Means Committee

Sonja Caldwell 271-2117

HB 629-FN, raising the cost of a boat decal fee and allocating the funds collected by such fees to the dam maintenance fund.

Hearing Date: April 15, 2026

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Lang, Murphy, Sullivan, Rosenwald and Fenton

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill raises the cost of a boat decal fee and allocates the funds collected by such fees to the dam maintenance fund.

Sponsors:

Rep. Leishman

Rep. Harrington

Rep. Ouellet

Who supports the bill: Jodi Grimbilas (NH Marine Trades Assoc.), Rep. Peter Leishman, Cory Stone, Michele Tremblay (NH Rivers Management Advisory Com)

Who opposes the bill: Julie Smith

Who is neutral on the bill: Corey Clark (NHDES)

Summary of testimony presented:

Rep. Peter Leishman

- He explained that the bill was the result of a study committee from 2024. He shared that study committee's report with the committee. DES and the Dam Bureau specifically worked with them.
- NH has issues with many of the 276 dams in the state. \$16 million is needed.
- He expressed the importance of dams to New Hampshire's lakes, including Lake Winnepesaukee, whose dam holds back 10 feet of water.

Senator Rosenwald asked why the costs associated with the bill were higher than the proposed revenues considering that the bill does not include any additional state expenses.

Rep. Leishman answered that there was an increased cost associated with administering this fund. He stated that the increased cost came from the revenue returning to the dam bureau after collection.

Senator Fenton asked how much a boat decal was at this time.

Rep. Leishman explained that it varied based upon a variety of factors including size and horsepower. He said he believed there were 107,000 boats registered in NH.

Senator Lang explained that it ranged from 24 dollars to 92 dollars.

Senator Fenton asked if this applied to saltwater boats as well as freshwater boats.

Rep. Leishman answered that it would apply to every boat registered.

Senator Murphy stated that the committee which had recommended this bill had made two recommendations. One was for the boater fee, while the other was the \$1.58 fee per foot of linear shoreline. He asked if there had been legislation calling for the latter method.

Rep. Leishman answered that the committee had looked at both recommendations and accepted the 5-dollar decal fee, rather than the shoreline fee.

Corey Clark – Dam Bureau, New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services

- The DES did not take a position on the bill.
- Mr. Clark stated that the money going into the fund would be going directly towards dam maintenance. This fund would be used for small repair projects as well as larger capital projects.

Senator Rosenwald asked why the fiscal note reflected a higher cost than the revenue raised.

Mr. Clark answered that it was due to the varying unknowns on the administrative side of things. The way the current boat registration fee revenue works is that it comes to the Dam Bureau from the Department of Safety. Also, he explained that some years might have large capital projects that require more funding while others may not.

Senator Rosenwald asked for clarification that the Department of Safety had not commented on this bill.

Mr. Clark stated that this was correct and reiterated that the fiscal note primarily reflected the administrative variance and varying unknowns.

Senator Murphy stated that it was his understanding that New Hampshire was the only state in New England that was responsible for running its dams directly. He asked for context on how this came to be.

Mr. Clark stated that the majority of dams in New Hampshire had been built by private companies in the 19th and 20th centuries, but that the state had taken a direct interest in acquiring these dams at the beginning of the 20th century as these dams progressively became less profitable. The Water Resources Board was created at that time as a quasi-governmental agency and took over a lot of these sites.

Senator Murphy asked what other states had done differently.

Mr. Clark answered that other states had not created a specific board for the purpose of these acquisitions. New Hampshire had experienced an awakening in the 1970s where the state began to ask how these dams could be funded as it had taken on a lot of assets and a lot of liability. The state began leasing sites for hydropower development. At that time, the incoming revenue could cover the cost of maintaining those dams. This was followed by deregulation and a trend of maintenance costs rising as revenue decreased. In 2004, the state had 12 hydropower sites that it leased out and is now down to just 8. This will continue to decrease as capital and regulatory expenses increase, as has been the trend. He stated that dams in other states typically are owned by private companies and when they are no longer interested, typically a private lake association has stepped up and taken over ownership. In a few high-profile cases in the Midwest where the dams failed and the private company couldn't cover the costs to rebuild, the communities got involved.

Senator Lang asked if his department was still continuing the policy of attempting to divest itself from state-owned dams.

Mr. Clark stated that they were, and that there was a hydro site in Concord that the state had been attempting to transfer to private ownership. In other instances, the state is trying to transfer dam ownership to the community. He cited another case where the state repaired a dam with FEMA money and as part of that agreement, transferred the dam to the town of Warren following reconstruction. He explained that the department is also working on clarifying easements to bring power to certain sites.

Senator Murphy asked if there were lake associations in New Hampshire that were seeking to buy these dams.

Mr. Clark answered that they had not had any cases where lake associations had purchased the dams from the state, however there are some lake associations that own the dams at the outlet of their lake.

Senator Rosenwald stated that if the state declared it could no longer cover the costs of maintaining dams, then the lake homeowners would have an incentive to get involved and the lake association might be compelled to take ownership of the dam to maintain water levels.

Mr. Clark answered that many lakes in New Hampshire were impounded by dams to some degree and that, should those dams fail, those water bodies would be lowered by some degree. In some cases, this might only be a few feet and in others, up to 20 feet.

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Date Hearing Report completed: April 16, 2026