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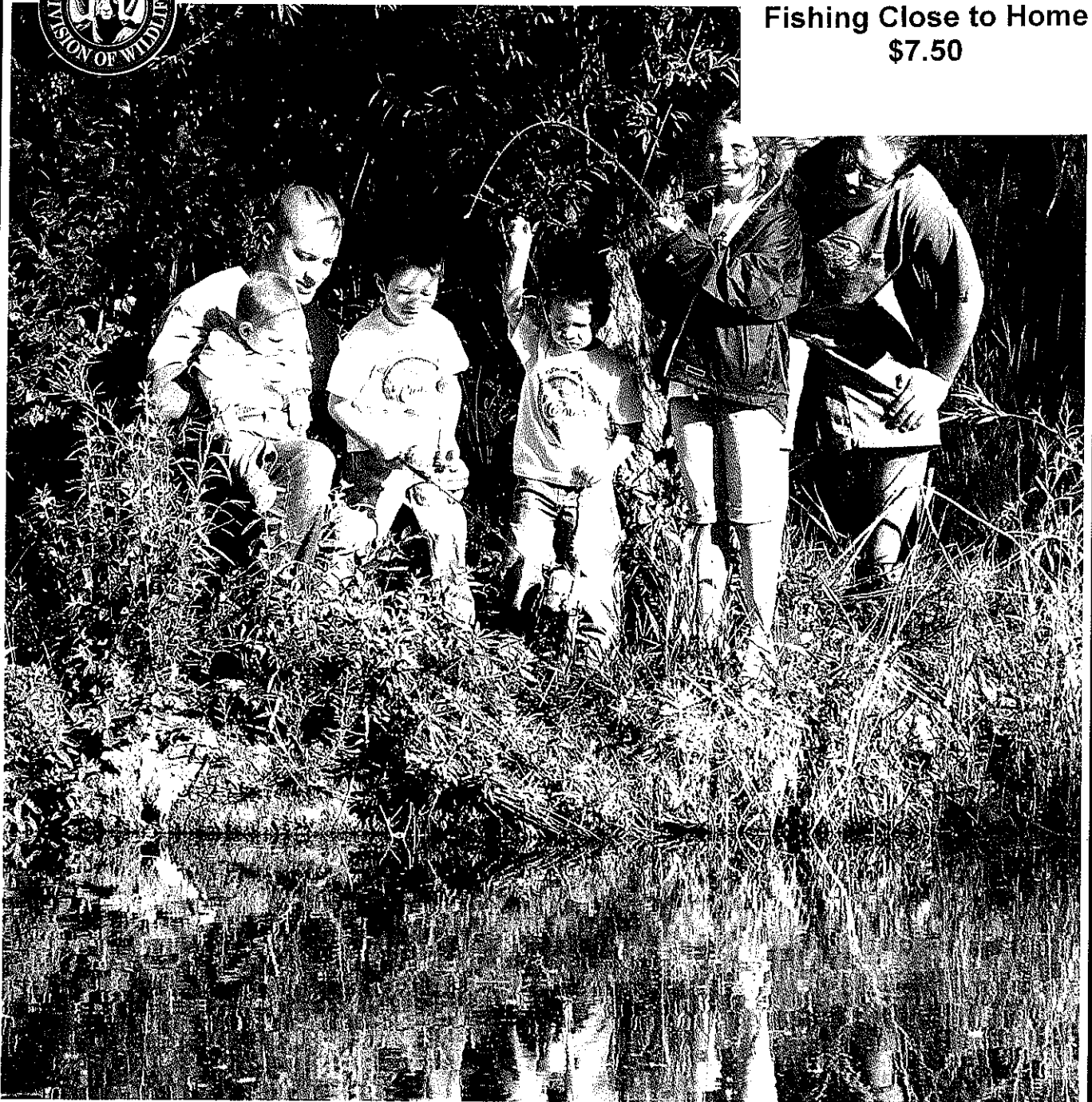
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Habitat stamp fix sets up fiery debate

Right and early Thursday, the much-discussed legislation re-authorizing Colorado's habitat stamp will receive its baptism of fire at the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

What happens during what seems certain to be a lively debate will say much about the way the state's wildlife affairs are managed — at least as pertains to the state legislature. The stamp was created three years ago to provide funding for land acquisition as a means of reversing the state's shrinking wildlife habitat. It must be renewed by the 2010 legislative session or face sunset. This current measure, Senate Bill 235, sponsored by senators Dan Gibbs and Jim Shar, represents an effort to get in all ahead of the deadline.

Over these first three years, the stamp raised approximately \$10 mil-



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lion that thus far has been used to protect 63,000 acres.

Trouble is, more than 70 percent has been spent on conservation easements, some relatively obscure. Only 23 percent involves lands that ensure a measure of public access. A pitifully small percentage of the latter figure went for fishing access, despite the fact that anglers purchased a preponderance of the stamps.

Little wonder this imbalance causes consternation among a hunting and fishing community that provided 98 percent of this initial funding, yet has received precious little substan-

tive gain to show for it.

The larger problem with the initial version of the stamp, which this revised measure corrects, is the stipulation that 60 percent of the funds be spent on big game habitat and migration — thus the overload of empty-calorie easements.

Mercifully, the new bill removes this requirement while expressing the intent that access be a major consideration in future purchases.

A second alteration establishes the stamp as a one-time \$10 purchase, eliminating the initial two-tier arrangement. The result should be increased income, a welcome development since the new bill provides for funds to be spent for the maintenance of lands acquired with stamp money.

Another major change creates the Colorado Wildlife Passport Fund, a ve-

hicle by which wildlife enthusiasts who do not hunt or fish can contribute to the program. Thus far, these so-called nonconsumptive users have not rushed forth to participate, proving that people are unlikely to pay for something they can get for free.

Detractors of SB 235 contend these stamp/passport funds could be put to better and broader use, such as helping maintain existing state wildlife areas. Another suggestion, one which deserves keen consideration, is to expand this vision of habitat protection to include urban lands, such as ponds and natural areas, that could greatly expand public access. It should be noted that no property yet has been acquired along the Front Range from Fort Collins to Pueblo.

The explanation why these expansive ideas weren't included is that

this would prompt heated opposition from the legislative enemies of wildlife — many of them prominent in the very halls where SB 235 will be debated.

All of which brings us back to the original and continuing concern about the way wildlife affairs are processed through committees, both the Senate and the House, dominated by agricultural interests — some of whom are belligerent foes of everything valued by those of us who hunt and fish.

Until this situation is corrected, the re-forming of a separate committee to deal with game, fish and park affairs, as once was the case, this balance and injustice will persist. Sooner this can be done, the better

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