

SALES TAX MIGHT BOOST WILDLIFE

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Utah parks and wildlife officials are waiting for their boss, Gov. Mike Leavitt, to endorse a statewide ballot initiative that, if passed, would increase the sales tax by an eighth of a cent. The revenue would go toward preserving wildlife habitat and developing new county and state parks.

Leavitt has not formally endorsed the Heritage Trust Tax bill that would put the issue on the ballot. But he has come close.

"The initiative is not being led by the governor," said Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela. "But he is interested. It is consistent with his earlier efforts to protect open space."

The chance to get a guaranteed amount of revenue each year separate from state park entrance fees or the sale of hunting and fishing licenses is the most important of several issues affecting parks and wildlife at the upcoming legislative session that began Monday.

Though acknowledging that a successful vote on the Heritage Trust Tax in the 2000 elections would help wildlife and parks agencies, Department of Natural Resources Assistant Director Darin Bird said his organization will not take a stand until Leavitt announces the state's position. The as yet unsponsored legislation is being pushed by groups such as the Utah League of Cities and Towns and Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife.

Wildlife issues, though relatively small in terms of monetary impact, often generate high emotions during the legislative session. Two bills modifying elk ranching rules will likely do that again this year.

According to Division of Wildlife Resources legislative liaison Mike Fowlks, one measure involves mule deer inadvertently fenced in by domestic elk ranchers.

Though exact language is not yet in place, Fowlks said one proposal would be for the state to sell the wild mule deer to the private elk ranchers.

The state owns all wild animals within Utah's borders, and Division of Wildlife Resources officials such as Fowlks don't like the precedent of selling those animals to private enterprise.

Another measure would allow elk ranchers to use natural barriers, such as a river or lake, as a substitute for a more expensive fence enclosure as current law requires. Since elk can swim easily across water barriers, the provision makes wildlife officials nervous. They do not want the genes and potential diseases from domestic elk herds to mix with wild populations.