

## **Frequently Asked Questions: Fishing and Hunting License Purchases Made via Unauthorized Websites**

### **What are the legal, authorized ways to purchase a California hunting or fishing license?**

California hunting and fishing licenses are issued by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and can properly be purchased in one of only four ways:

- In person, through a CDFW license sales office. These can be found at [www.wildlife.ca.gov/Explore/Organization/LRB](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Explore/Organization/LRB).
- In person, through an independent license sales agent authorized by CDFW (such as a local sporting goods store, large discount store, or a bait and tackle shop). Agents can be found at [www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales/OutletSearch/FindOutlet](http://www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales/OutletSearch/FindOutlet).
- Online through CDFW's Automated License Data System (ALDS). ALDS can be found at [www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/InternetSales/CustomSearch/Begin](http://www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/InternetSales/CustomSearch/Begin).
- Over the telephone, through CDFW's authorized Telephone Sales agent. Telephone Sales can be reached at (800) 565-1458.

### **What is ALDS?**

Launched in 2011, ALDS (also referred to as CDFW's Online License Sales and Service) is CDFW's only authorized online sales system. Customers can make secure online purchases through ALDS 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The ALDS website, [www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales](http://www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales), has a separate website URL than the main CDFW website, [www.wildlife.ca.gov](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov), but the two websites are linked, and both are authorized.

### **How can I tell the difference between an unauthorized license sales website and ALDS (the real one)?**

When making an online purchase, please check the URL of the site you are visiting to ensure you are on either the official CDFW website ([www.wildlife.ca.gov](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov)) or ALDS ([www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales](http://www.ca.wildlifelicense.com/internetsales)). These are the only authorized, CDFW-affiliated links for California hunting and fishing license sales.

Please note that an authorized website will never ask for your social security number as part of a hunting or fishing license purchase.

### **Has ALDS been hacked and, if so, what is CDFW doing to protect my information?**

ALDS has not been hacked and the integrity of the system remains uncompromised. The unauthorized websites appear to be brokering licenses, i.e., using personal information (birthdates, social security numbers, credit card information and other identifying information) provided by customers to purchase valid licenses from CDFW on the customers' behalf.

### **How many unauthorized websites are selling California fishing and hunting licenses?**

CDFW is currently investigating several unauthorized websites that are offering California hunting and fishing licenses for sale, including [onlinefishinglicense.com](http://onlinefishinglicense.com), [fishinglicense-usa.com](http://fishinglicense-usa.com), and [huntinglicense.online](http://huntinglicense.online). Please do not consider this a complete list. CDFW's investigation may uncover additional unauthorized websites.

### **What actions has CDFW taken to combat the unauthorized sites so far?**

CDFW is committed to preserving the integrity of product sales and protecting our state's hunters and anglers from fraud. We are actively investigating this matter and pursuing remedies. As of July 8, CDFW is in the process of doing the following:

- Issuing Cease and Desist letters to the operators of the fraudulent sites.
- Contacting Google, Yahoo and Bing to request that ads for the fraudulent sites be discontinued and removed from customer search results.
- Issuing warnings to the public using CDFW's social media channels, the syndicated "California Outdoors" Q&A column, direct email (Angler and Hunter Updates) and other outreach methods.
- Issuing an investigative inquiry to the State Attorney General's Office.
- Networking with other state agencies that have had similar experiences with fraudulent website operators.

### **I typed "buy a fishing license" into a search engine and followed the top link to purchase a license. Does that mean it was a legitimate website?**

No. Internet search engines sell advertising, and fraudulent website operators frequently purchase advertising on Internet search engines to reach the top search results. For this reason, CDFW's official website may not populate as the top result when customers search for key terms or phrases such as "California fishing license" or "buy a fishing license."

If you use a search engine and find a link to an unauthorized site, please consider reporting the link directly to the search engine:

- Google ([https://support.google.com/google-ads/contact/vio\\_other\\_aw\\_policy](https://support.google.com/google-ads/contact/vio_other_aw_policy))
- Bing (<https://about.ads.microsoft.com/en-us/resources/policies/report-spam-form>)

Reporting this information may help thwart the fraudulent website operators and prevent other individuals from being scammed.

### **If I was overcharged for a license purchased on an unauthorized website, can I get a refund?**

CDFW cannot refund fees collected by fraudulent website operators. However, your bank and/or credit card company may offer recourse if you have been defrauded. Please contact your bank and/or credit card company directly to see what options might be available to you.

### **I bought a fishing license online, and it cost more than what my neighbor paid for the same license at a CDFW office. Did I get scammed?**

Not necessarily. Authorized purchases made through ALDS are subject to an additional 5 percent handling fee, as are purchases made from authorized independent license sales agents (brick and mortar businesses including bait shops, sporting goods stores, big box stores, etc.). The difference is that the unauthorized websites tack on shipping fees and possibly other “convenience” fees, so customers who make purchases through these websites end up paying much more than 5 percent over the base price of their purchase.

Licenses and other items bought online through ALDS or in person from authorized independent license sales agents are never subject to shipping fees or any other fees beyond the 5 percent handling fee.

Purchases made in person at CDFW license sales offices are not subject to the 5 percent handling fee or any other additional fees.

**I recently bought a license online through one of the unauthorized sites. I later received the license in the mail. Is it fake?**

Not necessarily. To date, it appears that the unauthorized websites are brokering licenses, i.e., using customer-provided personal information (birthdates, social security numbers, credit card information and other identifying information) to purchase valid licenses from CDFW on customers’ behalf.

While the licenses that were mailed to customers may be authentic, the customers were overcharged, with some total purchase prices exceeding a 100 percent markup. Customers could also be at risk of future fraud or identity theft, as they have provided their personal information to the website operators.

**How can I make sure that the license I purchased isn’t fake?**

If you think you may have made a purchase through an unauthorized website, please send an email containing your phone number to [reportfraud@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:reportfraud@wildlife.ca.gov). CDFW staff will contact you for further information. You can also contact, in-person or using a telephone, a CDFW license sales office to check the validity of your recent purchase. CDFW staff can look up your customer profile in ALDS and identify purchases made under your profile. A list of CDFW license sales offices is available at [www.wildlife.ca.gov/Explore/Organization/LRB](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Explore/Organization/LRB).

**I entered personally identifiable information into a potentially fraudulent website. What steps should I take to protect my identity?**

Identity theft is someone obtaining personal information (such as your name, social security number, driver license number, credit card number or banking information) and using it for an unlawful purpose. Everyday citizens, business owners, well-known celebrities and children all fall prey to identity theft. In California, all forms of identity theft are crimes (Penal Code section 530.5 et. seq.).

These resources offer guidance on how to protect yourself from identity theft and provide information about what to do if your identity has been stolen:

- California Department of Justice - <https://oag.ca.gov/idtheft>
- California Department of Motor Vehicles - [www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/dmv/detail/consumer/fraud](http://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/dmv/detail/consumer/fraud)
- Federal Trade Commission - [www.consumer.ftc.gov/topics/identity-theft](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/topics/identity-theft)