Waterfowl artist Elton Louviere is getting his first taste of politics, and he's not real happy about it.

The Legislature is just one vote away from creating a state duck stamp, and Louviere is having no luck trying to protect the interests of Louisiana artists.

"The Legislature really doesn't understand that a state duck stamp is big business and a big opportunity for Louisiana artists," said Louviere, a Lake Charles resident.

The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries wants to copy about 20 states which require waterfowl hunters to purchase state stamps as well as federal stamps.

The agency plans to use the proceeds from the $5 stamp — a projected $200,000 — to purchase waterfowl habitat.

Virginia Van Sickle, secretary of the department, told a Senate committee that she envisions a contest in which artists from throughout the nation would compete for the privilege of painting the scene to be depicted on the stamp.

Louviere asked the panel to limit the contest to Louisiana artists for at least five years, but Van Sickle didn't like the idea and the panel rejected the artist's request.

The full Senate is poised to vote on the issue and Louviere is looking for some votes.

"I'm not used to dealing with legislators," he said in an interview. "I believe they think that I'm a selfish artist trying to get a job but they don't understand how it works.

"Louisiana artists have been looking forward to a Louisiana stamp for years. This could give a Louisiana artist and this state some real attention. Louisiana artists should be respected and few in this state even know about us."

Louviere said many states have scrapped the contest concept because it's too much trouble. Instead, they turn to giant publishing houses.

"There's a lot more to this than a $5 stamp," he said. "The publishing houses make the money off the prints and they offer a state a package deal, which includes the publishing house's artist."

Prints suitable for framing are prized highly by collectors, who couldn't care less if the stamp is a work of art, said Louviere.

"That's especially true in the first-of-state print," he said.

The prints are manufactured in limited numbers — several thousand — and are investments, he said.

"They sell for about $125 apiece and the state gets roughly 20 percent while the publishing house keeps the rest," he said. "Anyone who wants to purchase a print once they've all been sold must go to a gallery and pay double the initial price of $125.

"This is big business and the publishing houses are going to besiege
Louisiana. I think Louisiana artists might be frozen out."

Louviere has received national recognition and had been hired by Ducks Unlimited for print work. Ducks Unlimited is a national organization of sportsmen that purchases waterfowl habitat to protect the species.

“We’ve got some good artists in this state but they don’t get enough recognition,” Louviere said, “The Louisiana stamp can give us a boost.”

Ducks Unlimited purchased 4,300 prints of one of Louviere’s paintings three years ago and sold them nationally at auctions.

“That print raised $800,000 for Ducks Unlimited,” he said.

Louviere also was selected by Mississippi to design a print for Ducks Unlimited in that state.