

Florida Fish Busters

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New Rules for Florida's Freshwater Fisheries

By: Bob Wattendorf, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, with special thanks to Dale Jones

Florida earned the title "Fishing Capital of the World" by coupling its great resources with responsible management of those resources by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

Relentlessly driving home the message of how people can and must be responsible stewards falls under the purview of the FWC as well. By producing Florida Fish Busters, FWC news releases, publications and Web sites and by participating in fishing and boating events, the FWC focuses attention on the immense task of managing and conserving resources for future generations.

Actual management of fisheries requires a three-pronged approach through habitat, fish and people. Programs such as drawdowns, pollution abatement and revegetation enhance the habitat. Fish management requires the scrutiny of hatcheries and fish health and genetics. Through education, outreach and regulation management, the public engages with the whole approach.

The FWC gathers public input through meetings and surveys that create science- and social-based rules, using solid research and local impact to ensure a bright future for Florida's resources and anglers.

Because of this process, several new freshwater fisheries rules go into effect beginning July 1. These rules are designed for the long term to prevent constant alteration.

“The FWC remains flexible to changing environmental and social situations,” said Dale Jones, the coordinator of the changes for the FWC, “so we can adapt to evolving needs and provide quality, safe and sustainable opportunities.”

The following is a summary of the new rules that will be included in the next printed rules and online at MyFWC.com/Fishing/Rules.html.

To be consistent with other firearm regulations, the FWC passed a rule making it legal for someone to possess a legal firearm on an FWC fish management area (FMA). The new language prohibits use of firearms for taking fish and wildlife on 38 FMAs, where possession of a firearm was outlawed previously.

A number of maintenance issues required that several lakes associated with the Fish Orlando! project be removed from the FMA system. They are lakes Lorna Doone (Orange County), Richmond (Orange County), Kirkman Pond (Orange County) and Lake Dot (Seminole County). The new rule also prohibits possession of cast nets in lakes Ivanhoe (Orange County) and Santiago (Orange County), which remain part of the Fish Orlando! project.

The Joe Budd Pond FMA in Gadsden County opens to public fishing only when established by executive order, to accommodate fish camp dates and classroom activities at Joe Budd Aquatic Education Center. This year, the pond will be open to the public during daylight hours on



Joe Budd Aquatic Education Center Director, Rae Waddell, provides tips on the proper use of spinning gear.

weekends between July 4 and Sept. 2, including Independence and Labor Day holiday weekends.

At Tenoroc FMA (Polk County), a new rule exempts permitted alligator hunters from entering the FMA at designated entry points. The rule also renamed lakes East Pasture and West Pasture to Pine Lakes and increased angling opportunities in these two lakes to include licensed anglers accompanied by a child under 16 years old. Other changes at Tenoroc include limiting discharge of firearms to the firing range or during FWC-sponsored events and requiring dogs to be leashed, unless authorized by the FWC.

A statewide rule change redefined species that may be taken for use as bait with a dip net, cast net (1-inch maximum stretched mesh), trap or minnow seine. Those species now include golden shiners of any size and other freshwater nongame fish (including catfish) less than 8 inches total length, unless specifically prohibited. This replaces less-specific language that referred to “minnows of nongame fish.”

Nongame freshwater fish of any size also may be harvested with cast nets (no mesh or net size limit) in the South and Northeast regions, in Citrus and Glades counties, and in most of the Southwest Region. An



exception makes possession or use of cast nets in waters

Cast nets with 1" or smaller mesh may be used throughout the state to take minnows, but any size cast net may be used to take nongame fish such as tilapia in some areas.

adjoining Saddle Creek FMA (Polk County) illegal. This removes the size limit on cast nets in the South Region, making it consistent with other regions where they are allowed. In the Northwest and North Central regions, cast nets still may be used only for taking bait and must have 1-inch or smaller stretched mesh.

Fishing gear used by recreational or commercial fishermen must be marked clearly and legibly with the fisherman's name and address. This includes gear such as hoop nets, wire traps, slat baskets, trotlines, bush hooks and setlines and will help with enforcement and removal of abandoned gear or improperly positioned gear that creates a navigational hazard.

The most significant rule changes concern Lake Okeechobee and received support from the public at two local meetings. These new rules will enhance the fishery's recovery from recent environmental setbacks. The black bass length regulation on Lake Okeechobee moved from a 13- to 18-inch slot limit to an 18-inch or greater minimum length limit. Also, a new rule establishes a 10-inch or greater

minimum length for black crappie on the lake. In addition, the boundary definition for Lake Okeechobee now includes the C-41-A Canal from the intersection of the C-38 Canal upstream to the S-84 structure.

The black bass regulation on Lake Trafford (Collier County) was changed to a five-fish bag limit and all bass must be 18 inches or longer, with only one bass 22 inches or more in total length.

So if you are ready to contribute, feel free to contact the FWC and give some input. One way is to complete a survey (see MyFWC.com/Fishing and scroll down in the right column to “Take the Survey”). Another way to help conservation efforts and save money is to purchase a five-year freshwater fishing license. There is a special offer going on right now where you get free stuff in the mail when you buy one (see MyFWC.com/Fishing/5yr-2008.html).

Additional information is available at MyFWC.com/Fishing/Roundtable. Instant licenses are available at MyFWC.com/License or by calling 1-888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356).

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