

Managing Ponds for Recreational Fishing



DNR

**South Carolina
Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater
Fisheries Division
Freshwater Fisheries Section
www.dnr.sc.gov**

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Introduction

FISHING is one of the most popular participation sports in South Carolina and interest continues to grow. A recent survey by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service showed that over 609,000 anglers participate in some form of freshwater fishing in South Carolina and contributed nearly \$1.2 billion to the state's economy, an indication that fishermen will spend considerable time and money to enjoy their sport. While the majority of this angling effort occurs in public waters, the state abounds in privately-owned fish ponds, which, when properly managed, provide excellent fishing near home for a reasonable cost. But good fishing in ponds seldom just happens — it takes careful planning and management. This publication provides South Carolina pond owners with guidance to increase their pond's potential to produce quality fishing year after year.



SCDNR Education

A properly managed fish pond can provide hours of angling enjoyment as well as aesthetic value.

Pond Construction

A prudent person would not start building a house without first designing and planning a structure that suits his needs. A prospective pond owner should likewise plan a pond that is located suitably, designed and built properly and that satisfies his fishing requirements. A number of considerations and details that should be addressed regarding the planning and physical construction of a pond are beyond the scope of this guide booklet. Prospective pond owners should research all available information regarding pond construction and seek advice provided by state and county agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and the various county extension services.

Preparing a Pond for Stocking

Once construction is completed and the pond basin contains sufficient water, it is time to stock the fish. Competition from “wild” fish species is one of the major reasons for poor fishing in South Carolina ponds. It is important that any fish present be eliminated prior to stocking, regardless of whether the pond is newly constructed or is an existing pond in need of **renovation** and restocking. In some instances this can be accomplished by completely draining the pond and allowing the pond basin to dry over a period of time. In most cases the use of a federally approved chemical **piscicide** or fish toxicant is required. The chemical most commonly used for this purpose is **rotenone**. This compound is used to kill fish without harming other animals (it affects only creatures having gills). Ponds located on a stream may be subject to the introduction of wild fish entering from upstream but this situation is largely unavoidable. If rotenone is to be applied to the pond’s feeder stream, legal issues dictate the application be restricted to only that stream reach under the direct ownership of the pond owner(s).

NOTE: Rotenone is a restricted-use **pesticide**, which means that a category 5, South Carolina-certified applicator license is required for its purchase and/or use in South Carolina. Unfortunately, no feasible alternatives to rotenone are currently available. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain the assistance of a certified applicator. The use of rotenone in ponds located on a stream can pose a number of possible complications including questions of legal liability and environmental responsibility should the material be allowed to contaminate waters downstream of the immediate pond site. The use of rotenone in these situations demands extreme care and vigilance and should be carried out only by licensed individuals who have proper knowledge and experience. **AS WITH ALL CHEMICAL PRODUCTS, READ AND FOLLOW ALL LABEL INSTRUCTIONS.**

Rotenone should be applied at the rate of 6 pounds of 5% powder per **acre-foot** of water. An acre-foot is an acre of water one foot deep. To determine the number of acre-feet in your pond, multiply the number of surface acres by the average depth in feet. Be sure to take into account shallow edges as well as deep holes in calculating average depth. It is better to actually measure the area and depths, rather than estimating them. Since the powder does not dissolve well in water, it should first be worked into a paste with a small amount of water. Gradually add more water until a thin slurry is obtained. The mixture should then be applied to any water remaining in the pond, including any potholes or areas of standing water, regardless of size. Some fish can survive for extended periods in nothing more than a deep footprint that contains water.

Liquid rotenone is also available but is often difficult to obtain. The 5% liquid formulation should be applied at a rate of one half gallon per acre-foot of water. Dilute it enough to cover the treatment area and apply it in the same manner as the powder.

Rotenone should be applied during the first half of September, so as to allow it to detoxify prior to restocking with hatchery fish in November or December. The rotenone will detoxify in 7 to 30 days, depending on water temperature. The cooler the water temperature the longer the chemical remains active. This time frame will also reduce the time period wild fish can enter the pond prior to the stocking, should this potential exist.

When renovating a pond, first lower the water level as much as possible. By doing this, less rotenone will be required and a more efficient kill will occur. All drain outlets in the pond must be closed during renovation and until the rotenone is completely neutralized. Rotenone that escapes downstream is toxic.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE AND LIABLE FOR ANY DOWNSTREAM EFFECTS!

After applying rotenone, fish should begin to surface within about 5 minutes. A large percentage of the fish will surface only once, then sink to the bottom and rise the next day or the day after as

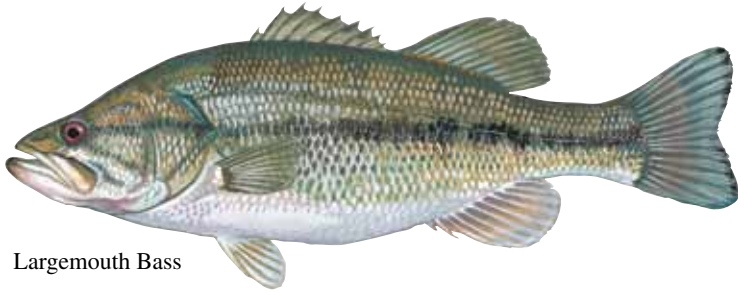
they begin to decompose. The dead fish may be removed from the pond and disposed of in an acceptable manner. If they are left in the water, no harm will be done except for appearance and temporary, unpleasant odors. Turtles, birds and other scavengers will remove many of the carcasses.

Stocking a Pond with Fish



Young largemouth bass fingerlings for stocking. SCDNR FWF

To provide the best recreational fishing opportunities, only certain species are recommended when stocking a pond. These include a combination of largemouth bass, bluegill and redear sunfish, more commonly known as shellcracker. Channel catfish may be stocked to provide additional fishing opportunities, but they are not necessary to maintain a balanced fish population. The fingerling fish for stocking may be obtained



Largemouth Bass

from commercial fish breeders licensed by the SCDNR. A list of approved vendors is available on the SCDNR web site (www.dnr.sc.gov) or by contacting one of the agency's regional offices.



Bluegill

Normally, bluegill and shellcracker should be stocked in the late fall or early winter. Largemouth bass are stocked the following spring. If channel catfish are desired, they should be stocked prior

to the bass. Prior to purchasing any fish, the pond owner should decide whether or not pond fertilization will be part of the future management of the pond. This determines the appropriate stocking rate. A discussion of pond fertilization may be found on page 11. Fertilized ponds are stocked at the rate of 1,000 bream (a combination of bluegill and shellcracker at a 3:1 ratio) and 100 largemouth bass per acre. A pond that will not be fertilized should be stocked at one half this rate. Channel catfish can be stocked at a rate of 25-50 fish per acre (Table 1). It is critical not to overstock the pond as this could result in a population imbalance and dissatisfaction with the fishing it produces. If you wish to stock species other than those recommended by the SCDNR, you should first consult with the regional fishery biologist. Some pitfalls associated with other species that may not be evident to



Redear Sunfish



Channel Cat

Table 1: Recommended species, stocking rates and time for fertilized and unfertilized ponds.

Fertilized Pond			
Species	Bluegill/ shellcracker	Largemouth bass	Channel catfish*
Stocking Rate	1000/acre	100/acre	25-50/acre
Stocking Time	Nov-Jan	May-mid June	Nov- Jan
Unfertilized Pond			
Species	Bluegill/ shellcracker	Largemouth bass	Channel catfish*
Stocking Rate	500/acre	50/acre	25/acre
Stocking Time	Nov-Jan	May-mid June	Nov- Jan

*Optional species



Golden Shiner

pond managers include a tendency for some species to over populate or otherwise compete with the bass/bluegill population and negatively impact their successful reproduction and growth.

Two species that are commonly advertised for pond stocking are crappie and “Georgia giants” or hybrid bream. Crappie do well in large lakes and reservoirs where water levels often fluctuate. In smaller lakes and ponds, their abundance is cyclic or erratic, and they can overcrowd and cause a severe population imbalance. They also compete directly with bass and bream for food. “Georgia Giants” are bream hybrids reputed to have a very high growth rate. Stocked in a similar manner as bluegills, they are aggressive and bite well. One of the hybrid bream’s primary problems is that after several generations they will genetically revert back to the original parent crosses used to produce them which are bluegill and green sunfish. Green sunfish are highly competitive and are not considered a suitable fish for a recreational fish pond. In order to maintain the hybrid characteristics of the “Georgia giant,” renovation of the population and restocking will likely be required about every three years. Most pond owners who have tried these hybrids in South Carolina report that the fish falls considerably short of expectations; thus SCDNR does not encourage their use. In addition, the use of shiners as bait is not recommended due to their tendency to over populate and become competitive with bluegill, should they be introduced into the pond.



Black Crappie

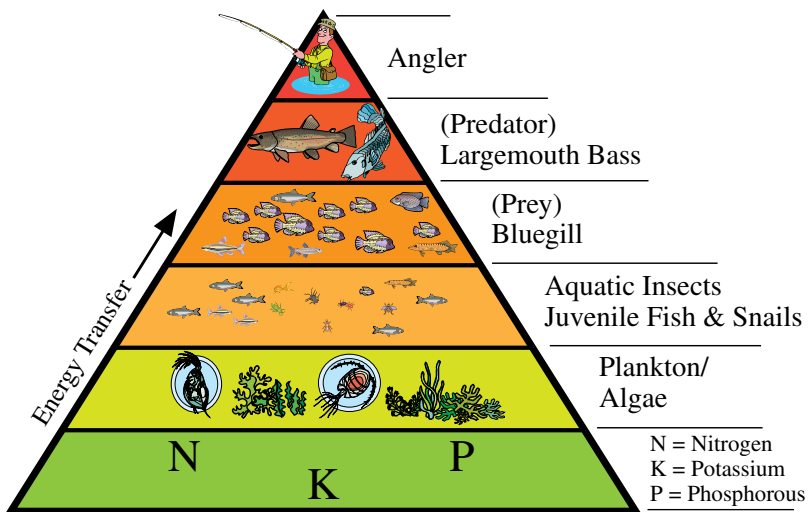


Yellow Bullhead

Wild fish species such as golden shiner, bullhead catfish, crappie and others compete with the pond’s bass/bluegill population for food, cover and space.

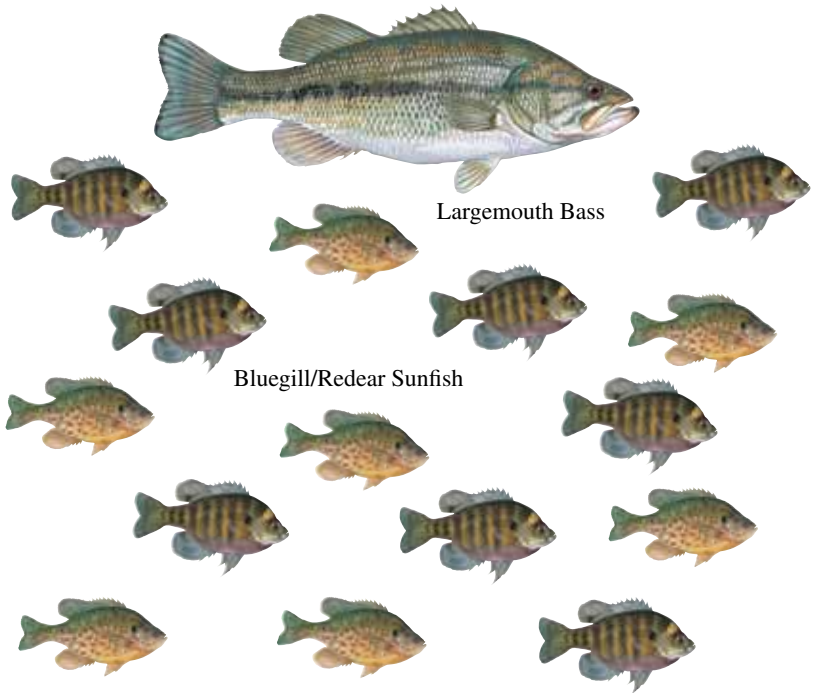
Fish Production

In order to successfully manage a recreational fishing pond, the owner should be aware of some basic principles that govern the status of the pond's fish population and ultimately the quality of the fishing. The organic and inorganic nutrients found in every pond serve as the building blocks for the pond's aquatic food pyramid. Simply stated, these nutrients support the microscopic algae or **phytoplankton** that are eaten by equally small animals called **zooplankton**. Zooplankton is, in turn, eaten by small aquatic crustaceans, insects and other organisms. These food items are consumed by bluegill and young bass that ultimately are eaten by the pond's larger bass. Properly managed ponds maintain a more productive food web and have a higher **carrying capacity** or ability to support and grow fish than those that are neglected or are poorly managed. Carrying capacity refers to the maximum weight (usually expressed in pounds per acre) of fish that a pond will support during a set period of time. In highly productive ponds, the carrying capacity may exceed 300 pounds of fish per acre per year, although most well-managed ponds produce considerably less. In order to achieve and maintain a balanced fish population, proper stocking and fish harvest are essential. **Balance** refers to the ratio and weight of predatory fish (largemouth bass) to forage fish



Aquatic Food Pyramid.

(bluegill/shellcracker) in the pond. A well-balanced fish pond can sustain the growth and reproduction of each species, over time, in the presence of angler harvest and natural **mortality**. The bass depend on a healthy, reproducing bluegill population for food and in turn serve to keep the numbers of bluegill in check. In order to maintain a proper balance, the pond should have roughly 3 to 5 pounds of bluegill/shellcracker to one pound of largemouth bass. For any of a number of reasons, a pond's fish population may become out of balance, including improper stocking, introduction of competitive species, improper harvest, excessive aquatic vegetation or failure to maintain the pond's fertility level. Once a population imbalance occurs, all species are likely to be impacted and may exhibit symptoms of overcrowding, emaciated body condition and a reduced level of reproductive capacity. These situations ultimately result in poor fishing.



Ratio of Prey and Predator.

Maintaining a proper ratio of bluegill (prey) and largemouth bass (predator) is essential to ensuring optimum productivity and growth of the pond's fish population.

Fishing the Pond

Do not begin to fish a newly-stocked pond until June of the year after the bass were stocked (or after the bass have spawned for the first time). At this time, the bass will generally weigh from one half to one pound and the bream should weigh approximately one quarter pound.

One cause of poor fishing in South Carolina ponds is the common practice of “saving” the pond by allowing only limited fishing with the expectation that this will result in larger and more numerous fish. This is a serious error and produces an overabundance of small, slow-growing fish. The bass/bluegill combination, stocked at proper rates, depends upon adequate harvest to produce good fishing year after year. While every pond is unique and the carrying capacities will vary from pond to pond, annual fish harvest should be near the following rates:

Table 2: Suggested fish harvest rates for fertilized and unfertilized ponds.

	Bream	Bass
Fertilized ponds	75-100 lb/acre/year	18-25 lb/acre/year
Unfertilized ponds	30-40 lb/acre/year	8-10 lb/acre/year

Fish harvest should be spread out over the year so that no more than 25% of the total is removed in any given month. During the first fishing year after stocking, it is recommended that bass be harvested at slightly less than the above rates. As a general rule:



Bluegill

Ted Borg

for every one pound of bass harvested, 3 to 5 pounds of bluegill/shellcracker should be removed. The harvest rate of channel catfish, if present, is left to the discretion of the pond owner since they generally represent a “put-grow and take” species that will require restocking as their numbers diminish

over time. **PROPER HARVESTING OF YOUR POND IS VERY IMPORTANT!** Failure to do so may result in population imbalances and, ultimately, in poor fishing. One helpful management practice is to keep a log recording a close estimate of the numbers, size and time fish are harvested from the pond. Paying close attention to the numbers and size of the fish typically caught in the pond can provide a good indicator of the status of the pond’s fish population balance. Table 3 shows examples of fishing results, the condition they may represent and management recommendations.

Table 3: Evaluation of a pond’s fish population, via angling.

Fish caught	Population condition	Recommendation
Blue gill/shellcracker – various sizes (5” - >8”) Largemouth bass – various sizes (commonly 1-3 lbs)	Fish population in balance	Follow normal management practices
Bluegill – many 2”-5” (few of harvestable size) Largemouth bass – few caught (generally large > 2 lbs)	Bluegill/ shellcracker overcrowded	Remove all bluegill caught by angling, seine or trap Do not harvest any bass
Bluegill/shellcrackers – few but large (7”-10”) intermediate sizes (3”-5”) few	Bass overcrowded	Increase bass harvest (target younger fish ½ - 2 lbs)
Largemouth bass – few caught (usually large > 2lbs), Bluegill/shellcracker few of harvestable size (>5”), Competitive species present (i.e. crappie, shiners, bullhead catfish etc.)	Competitive fish dominate	Renovate fish population and restock

Pond Liming and Fertilization

Pond fertilization has a number of advantages. A properly-fertilized pond will have a higher carrying capacity via increased fish production. The planktonic algae **bloom** which results from fertilization produces a light-green color to the water, reducing sunlight penetration. This shading effect also aids in preventing unwanted aquatic plant growth. In order to achieve the desired results from pond fertilization, the pond must have suitable water chemistry. The three chemical parameters most important in determining this include the water's hardness, **alkalinity** and **pH**. Fish ponds in South Carolina are often constructed in relatively infertile, acid soils, or receive water from swampy watersheds. Such conditions generally do not result in water chemistry adequate to support pond fertilization without corrective measures. The SCDNR can perform a basic water chemistry analysis to determine the **hardness**, alkalinity and pH levels at no charge, provided the water sample is delivered to one of the agency's regional field offices. In situations where water chemistry improvements are necessary, the application of crushed Dolomitic limestone (calcium magnesium carbonate) or agricultural limestone (calcium carbonate) is recommended, prior to pond fertilization. Other forms of limestone, such as hydrated, quick or slaked lime, should only be used under very specific conditions because these compounds can be toxic to fish. The limestone should be applied at rates varying from one to four tons per acre, depending on the water chemistry. Bulk agricultural lime is considerably cheaper than the bagged variety which is normally practical if only a very small quantity is needed.

Remember, the objective is to lime the soil the pond covers, not the water, so proper distribution of the limestone is necessary. In the case of a dry pond, the lime can be applied by a spreader truck or by broadcasting it over the pond basin, but if the pond is full of water the lime must be scattered over the entire pond surface. This can be done by rigging a liming platform made of plywood on the front of a sturdy boat and shoveling the lime out as evenly as possible as the boat travels over the pond. If large quantities of lime are required, the pond owner may opt to employ a private pond consulting company to conduct the application.



Bobby Wilson

Excessive pond fertilization may result in dense “blooms” of undesirable blue green algae.

Lime should be applied in the fall or winter so it will have adequate time to react with the soil prior to fertilizing in the spring. The duration of the lime’s effectiveness will vary from pond to pond and is largely governed by the **retention time** or the volume of water entering into and flowing out of

the pond. In ponds with low to moderate water loss liming will last about three years. Once a pond has been well-limed, small annual applications (25% of the original rate) may be applied to maintain the desired water chemistry and avoid having to apply the bulk amount.

Once the pond has been adequately limed, fertilization can be conducted. Pond fertilization should begin in the spring when the water temperature reaches 60° F or above and continue until late summer or when water temperatures again fall below 60° F. The initial spring applications should be done at two-week intervals until the desired algal bloom is established. The algal bloom will appear as a uniform green or greenish-brown color to the water. Generally, once this is accomplished fertilizer should only be reapplied when water clarity exceeds 18-20 inches which normally occurs after 30-45 days. Some ponds require more or less fertilization than others. If an algal bloom is not established by late spring, or it is difficult to maintain the proper bloom, the pond’s water chemistry is likely not adequate to support a fertilization program and additional liming may be required. Do not over fertilize as it produces excessively dense algal blooms which may increase the possibility of low oxygen and fish kills.

In general, three fertilizer formulations can be used successfully in fish ponds (Table 4). Granular fertilizer is the most widely-used method and usually produces a moderate to heavy alga bloom in



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A properly fertilized pond should exhibit a uniform light green or brownish green tint to the water. This is a result of microscopic algae suspended in the water column, commonly referred to as a “bloom.”



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Note the visibility in the water column has been reduced to a depth of about 18”-20.”

most ponds. Granular fertilizer may be applied in several ways. The most efficient way is to use an underwater platform or table. The platform should be about 4 feet x 4 feet square and situated so

that it is covered by 18-24 inches of water. It should also be located well away from the pond's spillway or water control structure. Next, pour the fertilizer onto the platform where water and wind currents will distribute the nutrients as they dissolve. This method keeps the fertilizer from direct contact with the pond's bottom soils which can tie up the fertilizer's nutrients and significantly reduce its effectiveness. One platform is sufficient for a pond three to five acres in size. A second, less effective method is to slit the fertilizer bag widely on one side and place it in shallow (one to two feet deep) water with the slit side up so that the fertilizer can dissolve. This method will not disperse the nutrients as well as a platform. Broadcasting the fertilizer granules onto the pond bottom is not recommended because much of the mineral content is wasted as it is tied up in bottom sediments.

Liquid fertilizers are popular and provide a good alternative to the granular form. Liquid fertilizers generally produce alga blooms more quickly than granular products because they dissolve immediately into the water. Applications should be made by mixing the prescribed amount of the liquid fertilizer with water and distributing the mixture over the entire pond using a boat. Do not apply concentrated liquid formulations directly to the pond as this material is heavier than water and will simply sink to the bottom, losing much of its effectiveness.

Recently, highly soluble, powdered fertilizers have become available. Typically applied at rates as low as two to eight pounds per surface acre, they can be broadcast directly over the pond's surface. The low rates required and ease of application are offset to some degree by the powdered fertilizers' higher cost. There are several circumstances when a pond should not be fertilized including:

- Water chemistry (pH and alkalinity) is not sufficient to support fertilization.
- The pond is frequently muddy.
- Nuisance algae or aquatic vegetation are present.
- The pond has excessive water flow through it which flushes the fertilizer or bloom out. The pond should have at least a 30-40 day retention time for fertilization to be effective.
- The pond is located in livestock pasturelands or otherwise receives high nutrient input from the surrounding watershed.

Table 4: Formulations and application rates for the three types of pond fertilizer.

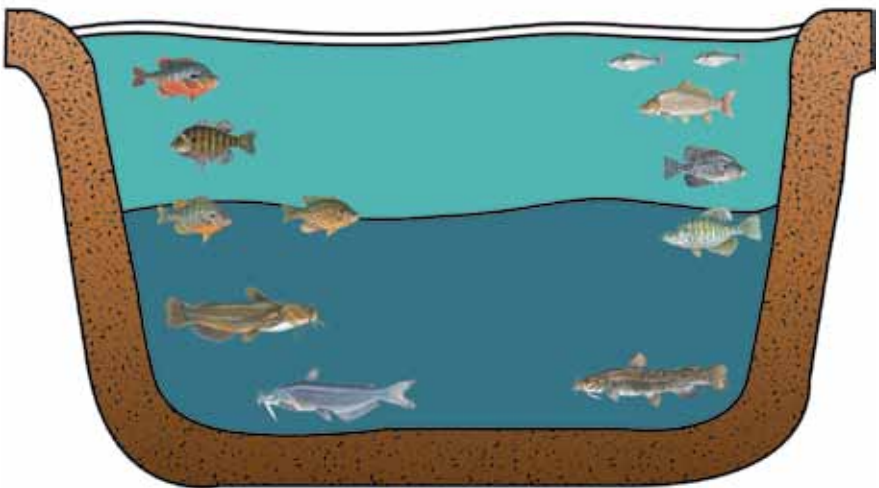
Formulation*		
Fertilizer Type	Nitrogen (N)- Phosphorous (P)- Potassium (K)	Application Rate**
Granular	20-20-5	40 pounds/surface acre
	18-46-0	18 pounds/surface acre
	0-46-0	12-18 pounds/surface acre
Liquid	10-34-0	1.0-2.0 gallons/surface acre
	13-38-0	1.0 -2.0 gallons/surface acre
Powdered	10-52-0	2-8 pounds/surface acre
	12-49-6	2-8 pounds/surface acre

*Other similar formulations may be available

** General fertilization rates. Follow rates and application methods on product label.

Water Quality

Good water quality is essential to maintaining a healthy pond and ensuring successful fish production. Many factors are involved and their relationships are complex. Pond owners should be aware of the important factors summarized below. Warmwater fishes grow best at temperatures between 75° F and 90° F. Since waters in South Carolina drop below that level in the winter, management procedures such as fertilization are halted or reduced during that time. In the summer, water temperatures frequently rise above 90° F, reducing the amount of **dissolved oxygen (DO)** that can be held by water. High water temperatures cause the water to form layers or to **stratify**, where a warm upper layer forms over a cooler layer. The upper layer may be from three to six feet deep, usually supports a good growth of phytoplankton, has ample dissolved oxygen and maintains good overall water quality. The lower, cooler layer, which frequently comprises most of the water in the pond, extends to the bottom, is low in or devoid of dissolved oxygen, supports little phytoplankton growth and generally has poor overall water quality. Due to this poor habitat, most pond fishes will not stay in this layer for any length of time. Most South Carolina ponds stratify in the late spring and remain that way until cooler temperatures return in the fall.



Stratification or layering of ponds.

Dissolved Oxygen (DO)

Dissolved oxygen is the most critical water quality variable in a pond. Its main source in water is the growth activity of the pond's phytoplankton. Some diffusion of oxygen into the water from the air occurs, but this is negligible. Since oxygen is produced by these microscopic plants and their growth is dependent upon sunlight, the amount of DO in a pond is related indirectly to the amount of sunlight received during the day, as well as to the amount of algal bloom produced. DO is lost from the water in two principal ways. Fish and other aquatic animals remove a portion through their respiration. While phytoplankton produce oxygen during sunlight hours, the process of photosynthesis, they use it at night in the process respiration. In properly fertilized ponds, the DO levels might typically range from 4 mg/l (**milligrams per liter**) at dawn to over 10 mg/l by late afternoon on a sunny day. Remember that in the summer, the pond is probably stratified and nearly the entire DO is in the uppermost portion of the water column. Fish require at least 3 mg/l of dissolved oxygen for long-term health and good reproduction, but can tolerate as little as 0.3 mg/l for short periods. Fish will die at DO concentrations below 0.3 mg/l. Extended exposure to marginal DO conditions can cause poor growth, increased disease and other adverse effects.

pH

The pH is a measure of the acidity of the water. The pH ranges from 0 - 14.0 with 7.0 being neutral. A reading below 7.0 is considered acidic and a pH from 7.0 to 14.0 is alkaline. The pH of pond water is greatly influenced by the presence of carbon dioxide, an acidic substance that is removed from the water by plants during the day. Consequently, the pH rises during the day and decreases at night. In fertile ponds, phytoplankton activity may cause the pH range to fluctuate significantly in a 24-hour period depending on the pond's water chemistry. Fishes grow best between pH 6.5 to 9.0, which can be obtained in properly-limed and fertilized ponds. At long-term values outside of this range, growth and reproduction will be reduced and death may occur.

Alkalinity and Hardness

Hardness refers to the concentration of elements (mostly calcium and magnesium) in the water. Alkalinity is the total concentration of bases. The two values are related and in most South Carolina ponds are typically very low – below 20 mg/l. For fertilizer to be effective, hardness and alkalinity must be above 20 mg/l, and this can be accomplished by proper liming. In addition, proper alkalinity and hardness levels will help to counteract the wide pH swings during periods of high photosynthesis from alga blooms.

Aquatic Vegetation Control

Aquatic weeds that grow in your pond are usually undesirable. If left uncontrolled, they can interfere with fishing and boating, utilize nutrients needed for phytoplankton growth, allow small bream to successfully escape bass predation, provide breeding places for mosquitoes and may cause DO depletions if they die-off suddenly. Once established, aquatic vegetation can be very difficult and expensive to address. The best cure for nuisance aquatic vegetation is prevention or early detection of and response to the problem. One step towards prevention is proper pond construction, including rapidly sloping edges and an overall water depth of not less than 3 feet. A properly-conducted pond fertilization program is also of great benefit. The resulting phytoplankton bloom discourages the growth of most aquatic weeds by shading them out so that



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If left unattended, aquatic vegetation can seriously restrict the use of a pond and reduce its aesthetic value. Reclaiming such situations can be difficult and costly.

they cannot gain a foothold. Fertilization should be considered a preventative measure, not a cure. Under no circumstances should a pond owner fertilize a pond with a pre-existing vegetation problem as this will likely only make matters worse. The weeds must be controlled prior to conducting fertilization.

Several methods of aquatic vegetation control can be employed in the event this becomes necessary. The pond owner should carefully consider all the circumstances present before embarking on any efforts to control a nuisance weed problem. The SCDNR recommends the pond manager seek technical advice from a qualified source to ensure the most effective, cost efficient and safest control option is used. A brief description of the more commonly used methods of aquatic vegetation control follows.

Winter Drawdown

A winter drawdown provides an inexpensive method of combating aquatic weeds, particularly in ponds with large expanses of shallow water. This technique involves lowering the water level each year from the first of December until the first of March so that the shallow, weed-infested areas are exposed to freezing and drying conditions during this period. Winter drawdowns rarely result in total control of a weed problem but can act to slow re-growth in the spring. A drawdown has the added benefit of concentrating forage fish populations so that bass or other predators can more readily feed on them, reducing stunted bream numbers and producing healthier bass. If the pond is shallow all over, be sure that enough water remains after drawdown to support the entire fish population, even if some weeds must remain submerged. A good rule of thumb is to leave enough water to maintain 50% of the pond's surface area. Also, be sure that the method used to remove the water does not allow fish to escape.

Mechanical

Mechanical or hand removal of weeds is sometimes possible but is usually feasible in situations where only a few plants are present or in very small ponds. Pond owners should be aware that some plant species may actually be spread due to fragmenting of the plant into pieces during the act of mechanical removal, so care should be exercised when employing this control method.

Herbicides

Aquatic herbicides are a widely used method of vegetation control in ponds. Properly applied, they can safely and efficiently combat a number of nuisance plant species. Accurate identification of the target plant is an absolute must prior to treatment as many herbicides are very selective in their action and level of control on a particular weed species. Always obtain professional advice on the plant's identification and recommendations for the appropriate herbicide treatment. This assistance is available, free of charge, from several state and federal agencies including the regional offices of the SCDNR. It is neither economical nor environmentally responsible to use a herbicide that is not effective. Use only herbicides that are federally-approved and labeled for aquatic weed control. **ALWAYS READ THE ENTIRE LABEL BEFORE YOU USE ANY HERBICIDE AND FOLLOW LABEL DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY.** Misuse or the use of unapproved herbicides could be dangerous to fish, mammals, turtles, birds, bankside vegetation, etc. They could cause downstream damage for which you could be held liable. If you have any doubt about the meaning of the label directions, contact an expert – don't guess.

Biological Control

Several species of fish have been successfully used to control weeds in recreational fishing ponds. These include tilapia (African bream) and triploid grass carp (white amur). Be aware that other species of fishes may also consume vegetation, but for the most part have been shown to be marginally effective or may be illegal to import or possess in this state. If you have any doubts about a particular species of fish, contact the SCDNR for clarification prior to obtaining them. Tilapia are tropical fish that are advertised by their producers to consume a wide variety of aquatic vegetation. Unfortunately, they are usually less effective than advertised, but will control some species of filamentous algae when stocked in the spring at rates from 250-400 fish per acre. Winter water temperatures are fatal to these fish so annual restocking is required.

Triploid grass carp are a sterile form of the original white amur. They often produce better long-term results for the money than herbicide treatments. Although grass carp will control a wide variety of submersed vegetation, they should not be considered a

“cure all” solution. They will not control plant species that grow out of the water like cattails, lilies, alligator weed, etc. Since grass carp do not effectively control all weed species, pond owners are strongly encouraged to have the pond inspected by a qualified pond specialist prior to stocking, so that the weeds can be correctly identified and stocking recommendations can be provided. The required stocking rate varies depending upon several factors including the target weed, extent of infestation, size of the water body, abundance of potential predators and potential for escape. In most cases, 10-25 fish per acre will provide satisfactory control. Grass carp with a minimum length of 12 inches should be stocked in the spring or early summer. Fish of this size or larger are less



When used in the appropriate situations, grass carp can provide an effective and cost efficient method of vegetation control as an alternative to aquatic herbicides.

vulnerable to predation. This species tends to migrate from a pond during high water events, so escapement issues should be addressed prior to stocking. These fish can be obtained directly from a state-approved and licensed commercial dealer, a list of whom is available on the SCDNR web page or from any of the regional offices.

NOTE: Non sterile (diploid) forms of grass carp are illegal to import or possess in South Carolina without a permit from SCDNR; such a permit is only available to commercial aquaculture operations. A state-authorized permit is required to buy or possess sterile (triploid) grass carp. This permit will be provided to the pond owner by the supplier at the time of purchase.

Miscellaneous Problems and Considerations

Fish Mortality

Most fish mortalities occur in South Carolina as a result of dissolved oxygen depletion, pesticide toxicity, or parasite and disease damages.

Oxygen depletion is by far the most common cause of fish kills in ponds. They can be largely prevented by good management practices, but will occasionally occur in even the best managed ponds. Although conditions are most favorable in the summer and early fall for low oxygen problems, generally these events are not predictable or wholly preventable by the average pond owner.

Some of the most common causes of DO depletion are:

- **“Turnover”** - Remember that ponds stratify during the summer and the lower layer of water contains little or no DO. A sudden cold front, heavy rain or even strong winds can physically mix the water in the pond, or overturn it. This mixing of the water column results in DO levels too low for fish to survive. If the previous few days have had little sunshine, the effect will be worse, since oxygen levels in the upper layer are likely to be lower initially.
- **Over fertilization** - Excessive fertilization can produce excessively dense blooms of phytoplankton or undesirable alga problems. These produce oxygen on sunny days, but very heavy blooms will utilize nearly all of that oxygen during the night, leaving very little for fish respiration.
- **Aquatic vegetation or algae die-off** - Sometimes a heavy phytoplankton bloom or infestation of aquatic weeds in a pond will die off naturally or as a response to herbicidal treatment. As the plants decompose, oxygen is consumed and DO levels may fall to a level lethal to fish.

Symptoms of DO depletion may include fish gulping at the surface of the water. This is especially noticeable early in the morning when oxygen levels are likely to be lowest or fish congregate near

sources of fresh incoming water. Large fish usually die first in situations of low DO, but if the problem is severe enough, smaller fishes will follow.

The only effective treatment is to aerate the water, either by using mechanical aerators or by exchanging the water in the pond with fresh water from a source. A number of aeration devices are available, but are generally not considered cost efficient to purchase and install in recreational fishing ponds. Do not “stir” the water up with an outboard motor or by other means as this acts to further dilute the small amount of oxygen that may be present in the water column.

Pesticide or Toxic Pollutant Exposure

Fish deaths due to pesticide toxicity are more common in intensively farmed areas. Occasionally, a heavy rain immediately after a pesticide application will wash chemicals off the plants and into an adjacent pond. Careless aerial spraying may also result in pesticide mortality.

Runoff accidents can be prevented by diverting field runoff from your pond, either with a diversion ditch or a **berm**. Aerial applicators should be encouraged to spray carefully and only under minimum wind conditions if ponds are near the treatment area. In urban settings, fish kills can result from exposure to a wide variety of pollutants, including petroleum products, industrial chemicals, wastewater or chlorinated water. These materials may enter the pond via storm water runoff, nearby ruptured pipeline, vehicular accidents, etc. Once the toxin is in the water, little can be done. Exposure in sufficient concentrations will usually affect smaller fishes first, rapidly working its way up to the larger ones. In the event a pond owner suspects a fish kill has occurred as a result of a pesticide or other pollutant, they should contact the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) immediately. Time is often critical in identifying the cause and minimizing its impacts. The pond owner should pay close attention and record any observations regarding the event as this will prove helpful in any investigation that follows.

Parasites and Diseases

Parasites and diseases are common for fishes in warm South Carolina waters. Infestations usually kill just a few fish at a time and generally present no major problem except to intensive commercial operations. The situation almost always corrects itself within a few weeks, and treatment is seldom practical, if even possible, for the average pond owner. The regional fishery biologist can often aid in identifying the problem and advise the best course of action.

Muddy Water

Turbidity prevents light penetration and prevents the growth of beneficial phytoplankton, the base of the food chain in ponds. Fish can tolerate muddy water but growth is often compromised because food production has been impaired. Turbidity or muddy conditions are usually caused by runoff from unstabilized watersheds such as cropland, highway drainage, construction sites, etc. This can be prevented by using appropriate land use practices on the watershed, construction of diversion ditches or the use of silt fences. In excavated ponds, it is sometimes sufficient to construct a low berm or dike around the pond perimeter to slow down unwanted siltation. It is important to identify the source of the problem and to stabilize the area with vegetation or other means, otherwise the muddy conditions will continue following each rain event. If excess turbidity persists, it may be removed by the application of **aluminum sulfate** (filter alum) at the rate of 50 lb. per acre-foot of water. The alum should be dissolved in water and quickly distributed over the entire pond surface, preferably by spraying. Application should be made during calm, dry weather and the water should be agitated as little as possible during and after application.

In ponds with a total alkalinity below 20 mg/l (as is the case with many South Carolina ponds), alum treatment may lower the pH to dangerous levels. Hydrated lime (slaked lime or builder's lime) applied at the same time at the rate of 30 lb. per acre-foot of water will counteract undesirable acid formation. It is important



SCDNR FWIF

Ponds that suffer from frequent or prolonged muddy conditions rarely make productive fish ponds. All effort should be made to identify and address the cause or source of the muddy conditions.

to distribute the recommended amounts of material as evenly as possible for best results.

An alternate method of clearing turbidity that has enjoyed considerable success consists of adding 12 pounds of superphosphate for each 1,000 cubic feet of water. This works out to about 520 pounds of superphosphate for every acre-foot of water. The superphosphate is applied by dumping it slowly from the bow (or stern) of a boat while moving slowly over the pond. It is important to distribute the recommended amounts of material as evenly as possible for best results. As it clears particulate turbidity, the superphosphate may also produce a heavy plankton bloom; however, the pH shift associated with aluminum sulfate is absent.

Another alternative is to lime ponds as recommended in the section on fertilization, prior to alum treatment. The lime will often precipitate clay turbidity by itself, but if cloudiness persists after liming, alum treatment may be used without danger of pH depression. If persistent turbidity occurs, consult a pond specialist.

Remember, identifying and addressing the source or cause of the muddy conditions is the key to eliminating the problem long term.

Artificial Fish Feeds

If a pond is properly managed, supplemental fish feeding is not necessary for good fish growth. In ponds that cannot be fertilized effectively, a regular feeding program can be used to increase production. Some pond owners enjoy the practice because it allows them to actually see their fish and it also concentrates the fish temporarily for easy hook and line harvest. In addition, the high protein content of these feeds will increase growth in the fish at a more rapid rate. Both bluegill and channel catfish will readily accept artificial feed once they become accustomed to a feeding program. Commercial fish food is available in a pellet, floating and sinking ration, however the floating variety is best because the amount of uneaten food can be easily determined. A fingerling, catfish-sized pellet is recommended because its smaller size is more easily consumed by small bluegill. Feed only as much as the fish will consume in 30 minutes because uneaten food is wasteful and may cause water quality problems as it decomposes. Feeding should be conducted daily during the spring, summer and fall and reduced or discontinued during the winter months when fish metabolism decreases. An automatic feeder is useful and can be set to feed several times a day. Gradually increase feeding rates to 7-10 pounds per acre per day without accumulating uneaten food. Reaching these feeding rates may take a period of time in infertile ponds. It should be noted that if sterile grass carp are present they often divert their appetite for vegetation and focus on the artificial feed intended for the pond's game fish.



Bluegill

Phillip Jones, SCDNR

Alligators

Alligator populations in South Carolina and throughout the Southeast have rebounded. Consequently, it is not unusual for one to take up residence in a fish pond. If this happens, it is generally not necessary to take any action. Alligators are opportunistic feeders and will consume fish, turtles and occasionally wading birds and small mammals that venture into the water. Alligators in a pond are a sign of a healthy ecosystem and do not represent a problem with the fish population as a general rule with the exception of grass carp which are recognized to be particularly vulnerable. It is illegal to feed, molest, or injure alligators. Never feed an alligators. Children and pets should not be allowed to swim in ponds containing alligators larger than six or seven feet in length. If a problem with an alligator is anticipated, contact your regional SCDNR office or conservation officer for assistance. They can advise you as to the best course of action, which may involve removal of the animal to a more suitable location.

Snakes

The wet margins of ponds can be ideal habitat for a number of snake species, including non-venomous water snakes and occasionally the venomous cottonmouth (water moccasin). It is unlikely that any of these species would feed extensively on live, healthy game fish. They tend to feed on dead, dying and sick fish. As scavengers, water snakes play an important role in the ecology and health of ponds, helping to maintain healthy fish populations and healthy ponds. Maintenance of pond banks by controlling brush and undergrowth, mowing or bush-hogging and eliminating rip-rap can deter snakes. Avoid unnecessary contact with snakes and regard them as a natural part of an aquatic or wetland environment.

Turtles

Several species of freshwater turtles can occur in ponds. Most of these species feed on plants and invertebrates (insects, crayfish etc.) or are scavengers on dead and dying fish. They may create a nuisance by taking fish bait, attacking fish on stringers or eating artificial food intended for the fish. Turtles rarely pose any problem to the pond's fish population. The only species capable of catching live game fish is the snapping turtle, however they typically do not

occur in large numbers. When air temperatures are warmer than water temperatures these species will bask on logs and pond banks. Many people mistakenly think they have an overpopulation of turtles when they see multiple turtles basking. Turtles, however, are long-lived species with high death rates in the egg and juvenile stage, and their populations are self-regulating. While trapping turtles from ponds is not a recommended management practice, it is not illegal to trap turtles in South Carolina for personal use or for management purposes.



Yellow-bellied Slider

Steve Bennett, SCDNR

Beavers & Other Problem Mammals

Beavers, otters and muskrats may cause problems by interrupting water supplies, destroying vegetation, or by burrowing into dams or pond banks. Otters can consume significant numbers of fish, particularly in smaller ponds. Trapping is the best way to reduce mammal populations, but all game laws must be observed. There are open seasons at certain times on otter, beaver and muskrat, and depredation permits may be obtained during closed seasons with proper justification. Seek advice from a SCDNR Furbearer Program Coordinator as to the best way to address problem mammals. You are encouraged to take advantage of their experience prior to attempting to control any nuisance mammal.

Livestock

Cattle and other livestock that have free access to a fish pond may cause damage in several ways. Their wading stirs up sediments, causing muddy water as well as bank damage. Wading will also hamper fish spawning in the spring and summer by damaging eggs and nests and by frightening fish from their nests. If livestock must be given access to your fish pond, they should be restricted to a small portion of the pond. This can be accomplished by the appropriate use of fencing.

Pond owners in South Carolina frequently place hog lots adjacent to their fish ponds to allow the hogs access to the water. While this practice is beneficial for swine, it poses a direct threat to pond fishes. Hog lot waste is very high in organic matter and can cause a DO depletion if washed into a pond suddenly by a heavy rain. A possible link also exists between animal manure and fish disease. Hog lot runoff should be diverted from the pond with berms or diversion ditches.

Water Birds

Fish are major food items for several water birds such as kingfishers, egrets and herons. However, their consumption is so low that there is no danger to pond population balance. Ignore them, or, better still, enjoy observing their unique habits. Another species of fish-eating bird whose numbers have increased dramatically in South Carolina in recent years is the crested cormorant. This diving bird is an efficient predator of fish and can consume large numbers in its daily feeding activity. Cormorants are nevertheless protected as are most other bird species leaving the pond owner with little more than deterrent options should these birds invade the pond. Ducks or geese often take up residence in ponds. These birds do not harm fish or their eggs and, despite a common belief, they are of little value for aquatic weed control.



Blue Heron

Phillip Jones, SCDNR

Appendix A: Glossary

Acre-Foot: An acre of water a foot deep. It contains 43,560 cubic feet of water. To calculate acre-feet, multiply the number of surface acres by the average depth in feet.

Alkalinity: The amount of bases (mostly carbonate and bicarbonate ions) in the water. Moderate to high alkalinity in a pond helps to prevent rapid pH changes and also insures an adequate supply of available carbon for phytoplankton growth. South Carolina ponds usually have low alkalinities.

Aluminum Sulfate: A compound that causes suspended clay particles (turbidity) to coagulate and precipitate from the water column. It is also called filter alum.

Balance: The ratio and weight of predatory fish (largemouth bass) to forage fish (bluegill/shellcracker) in the pond. A well-balanced fish pond will sustain the growth and reproduction of each species, over time, in the presence of angler harvest and natural mortality.

Berm: A low dike or retaining well.

Bloom: The green color produced in a pond when it has been fertilized. It is composed of millions of microscopic plants (phytoplankton) floating freely in the water, and provides the basis for the pond's food web.

Carrying Capacity: Refers to the maximum poundage of fish per acre a pond can support at a given time.

Dissolved Oxygen (DO): Oxygen which is dissolved in water. It is the form of oxygen that fishes require for respiration.

Hardness: The total amount of metal ions (mostly calcium and magnesium) dissolved in water. Ponds with a water hardness below 20 mg/l are difficult to fertilize economically. Hardness may be raised in a pond by liming. Alkalinity and hardness in South Carolina ponds are usually near the same magnitude.

Milligrams per liter (mg/l): Unit of measurement; the equivalent is one part per million. Example: To obtain a salt solution of 1 mg/l in one acre-foot (43,560 cubic feet or 325,830 gallons) of water, 2.7 lbs. of salt would have to be added.

Mortality: Death.

Pesticide: A chemical substance used to control pests, either plant or animal varieties. Herbicides are specifically for plant pests, insecticides for insects, etc.

Piscicide: A chemical specifically used to kill fish.

pH: Measure of the acidity of the water.

Phytoplankton: Microscopic plants in the water column that form the “bloom” in ponds. They represent the basis of the food web and generally produce a green or greenish brown color to the pond.

Renovation: Process of removing an existing fish population from a pond, usually with rotenone, and restocking with fingerling fish.

Retention Time: The period of time it takes for a pond to completely exchange all of its water (outgoing vs. incoming). Retention times may vary, depending usually on the volume of incoming water. If the retention time of the pond is less than about 3 weeks, fertilizer does not have a chance to work properly before it is flushed from the pond.

Rotenone: A Restricted Use Herbicide that is used to kill fish. It causes them to be unable to use the oxygen available to them. Rotenone is harmful to any animal that possesses gills.

Stratify: The phenomenon in which water “layers” in a pond with respect to temperature. The warmer, lighter water forms a high quality upper layer and the cooler, heavier water forms a low-quality layer on the bottom. The bottom layer usually has a much larger volume than the upper layer.

Turbidity: Muddy water. It is usually caused by suspended clay particles.

Turnover: An event wherein the upper, oxygenated layer of water in a pond is displaced, either by wind action or by a heavy, cool rain. This causes pond waters to mix, frequently creating overall conditions so low in DO that fish cannot survive.

Zooplankton: Microscopic, free-swimming animals that feed on the phytoplankton. They comprise the second order of food items in the pond’s food web.

Appendix B:

Agencies to Contact Concerning Fish Ponds

The Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) has field offices in every county in the state. For phone numbers, look in your local phone book under Government offices, U.S. Agriculture Department. *www.nrcs.usda.gov/*

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) is located at 2600 Bull Street, Columbia, SC 29201. For fish kill assistance only, call the EMERGENCY RESPONSE NUMBER: 1-803-253-6488. *www.scdhec.net*

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Offices:

Fisheries Region 1 Office

(Greenville, Oconee, Pickens, Spartanburg, Greenwood, Laurens, Union, Cherokee, McCormick, Edgefield, Abbeville, Anderson)

311 Natural Resources Dr.
Clemson, SC 29631
(864) 654-6346

Fisheries Region 2 Office

(Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Marion, Marlboro, York, Lee, Chester, Fairfield, Kershaw, Williamsburg, Lancaster)

2007 Pisgah Road
Florence, SC 29501
(843) 661-4767

Fisheries Region 3 Office

(Newberry, Saluda, Lexington, Richland, Aiken, Calhoun, Orangeburg, Bamberg, Barnwell, Allendale, Sumter, Clarendon)

P.O. Box 167
Columbia, SC 29202
803-955-0462
803-259-5474

Fisheries Region 4 Office

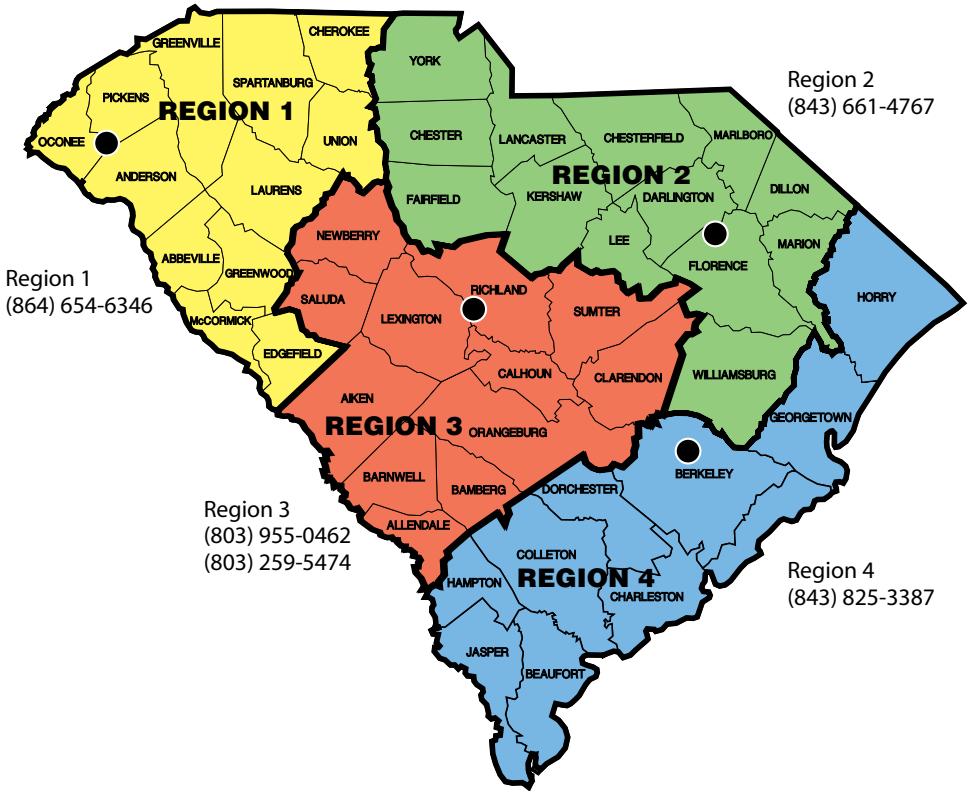
(Georgetown, Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester, Horry, Colleton, Jasper, Beaufort, Hampton)

305 Black Oak Rd.
Bonneau, SC 29431
(843) 825-3387

Cover photograph by SCDNR FWF.

Fish illustrations by Duane Raver.

Thank you to the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
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If you have urgent business, such as a fish kill, and cannot contact a fisheries office near you, call the SCDNR Law Enforcement “Hotline” number: 1-800-922-5431. The operator should be able to contact the appropriate person. Please do not call the “Hotline” number for routine requests.



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Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from the programs and activities of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources is available to all individuals regardless of age, race, religion, color, sex, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, status as a parent, and protected genetic information. Please direct any questions to the SCDNR, Chief of Staff, 1000 Assembly Street, Columbia, SC 29201; 803-734-3672 or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Diversity and Civil Rights, 1875 Century Boulevard, NE, Atlanta, GA 30345; 404-679-7080/7148.