

Managing Kentucky Fee Fishing Operations

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Privately owned fee fishing operations are located throughout Kentucky, but most are concentrated in the central and eastern regions of the state. Fee fishing facilities may often be referred to as pay lakes or fish out ponds. These operations provide an alternative fishing resource for those who are unable or are not interested in utilizing more traditional fisheries (Cichra et al 19941).

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) requires an annual fee fishing permit for commercial operations. This allows customers to fish there without a personal KDFWR state-issued fishing license. Registered fee fishing operations are provided with daily fishing permits for their customers. Yearly fishing licenses are required when fishing in non permitted facilities or public waters.

KDFWR issues two different fee-fishing permits depending on whether the catfish stocked are farm-raised fish from private farms or wild-caught fish from public waters. If all or some of the catfish stocked into facility ponds are wild-caught fish, the license fee is \$600.00 for the first two pond acres and \$50.00 for each additional acre of water. If only farm-raised catfish are stocked, or no catfish are added at all, the fee is \$250.00 for the first

two acres of ponds and \$50.00 for each additional acre. Additionally, the application asks about the stocking of wild-caught, trophy flathead and blue or channel catfish that exceed 28 inches in length. This application is subject to change, but can be found at the following link:

<https://fw.ky.gov/Fish/Documents/commercialicapp.pdf>

Fee fishing operations may stock wild-caught catfish from commercial fishermen, farm-raised catfish, or both. Wild-caught catfish may be less expensive than farm-raised catfish, which must be fed a commercial catfish food to grow. Larger fish (greater than 10 lbs.), including blue and flathead catfish, are more commonly available from commercial fishermen. Wild-caught catfish are harvested by gillnets, hoop nets or slat traps. Catfish are kept alive onboard open boats in tanks that exchange water from the rivers or lakes. Unfortunately, fish health may be negatively affected due to handling stress when they are held and transported, particularly during warm weather.

Although farm-raised catfish may be more expensive, they may be less prone to disease due to reduced handling stress. Farm-raised fish are grown in small ponds of known origin and are typically cultured without other fish species, which may further reduce the incidence of disease.

Fee fishing operations usually consist of one or more 1/2 10 acre ponds. Ponds are typically stocked with 1 4 pounds catfish at densities of 1,000 4,000 pounds per surface acre. Ponds are often stocked weekly with 500 pounds of fish or more, on a Thursday or Friday for weekend fishing. Customers often observe fish stockings. Catfish are bought from live haul truck operators at prices that may vary from \$.70 – \$2.00 per pound. The price of fish paid by fee fishing operations is dependent on factors such as: the source of fish (wild-caught or farm raised), the current price paid by catfish processing plants, the

quantity of fish delivered, and the distance they must be transported.

Heavily stocked ponds should be equipped with aeration to ensure fishing success. Aeration devices should be used in ponds that are stocked with 1,000 lbs. or more of fish per surface acre. Aerators can be placed to allow operational efficiency, but provide as little inconvenience and potential danger to customers as possible. Electric aerators rated at 1 hp. or more per acre may be installed with timers for nighttime supplemental aeration. Larger gasoline or diesel-powered aerators are more suitable for emergency aeration during oxygen depletions.

Fee fishing operations may accept frequent, small deliveries of variable sized fish. These operations may provide a local market for beginning and small-scale catfish producers. Such markets have provided a link in establishing the pond-raised catfish industry in other southern states. One or more fee fishing operations may be established in a number of Kentucky counties. Some of these facilities are located near larger population centers, while many successful operations exist in more rural areas.

Irregularly shaped ponds of 1/2 - 2 acres provide a more natural and aesthetic fishing environment. Smaller ponds are easier to manage. Two or three ponds provide management advantages over a single pond operation. If fish become diseased, will not bite, or if pond maintenance is required, the numerous ponds will allow the operation to stay open. Drain structures may be installed in newly constructed ponds to allow rapid draining. Shallow pond areas, less than 2 feet in depth, should be avoided, as they promote aquatic plant and algae growth. If possible, ponds should be constructed with a 3-foot minimum depth. A smooth pond bottom will permit the seining and removal of non-biting fish. The numbers of non-biting, or hard-to-catch catfish has been estimated to be as high as 40% in fee fishing ponds (Cichra 1998). Triploid grass carp may be stocked to control soft stemmed aquatic plants; however, these fish can reach large sizes quickly and are periodically caught by hook and line. Large grass carp can be dangerous to handle.

Cremer et al. conducted a 1984 fee fishing survey that indicated 42% of Kentucky customers fished alone, while 44% fished in family groups. Most customers were male, and traveled from local or nearby areas.

Good parking facilities and a combination ticket/concession stand should be located at the main entrance. Operations should have limited access for security purposes. Facility liability-insurance should be considered.

Kentucky fee fishing season may begin in March and extend into October; however, business often declines after Labor Day weekend. Extended rainy or hot weather may negatively impact customer attendance. Some operations are open 24 hours, 7 days a week, while others have limited hours or are only open Thursday through Sunday. Commonly, businesses will charge either a general admission fee of \$12.00 - \$20.00 a day (called "Ticket Lakes") with a 5-10 fish limit. Additional tickets may be bought. Some larger scale operations will charge a lower admission fee and an additional price per pound for fish caught (called "Pound Lakes"). Selling fish by the pound allows for more accurate fish inventories but requires an attendant to weigh the fish as customers leave. Customers should be discouraged from returning captured fish to the pond since they often do not survive. However, this practice is common in trophy ponds that contain large catfish.

Rainbow trout may be stocked during the fall, winter and spring months when water temperatures remain below 68 degrees F. Trout will not survive handling stress when water temperatures are warmer than 70 degrees F.

Flathead catfish consume other fish and are not recommended for fee fishing pond stocking. Avoid stocking largemouth bass, crappie, shad, bluegill and other fish into fee fishing ponds as their excessive spawning may make pond management difficult.

Catfish will "take the hook" better if they are fed less than 1% of their body weight per day (Masser et al 1993). However, feeding a maintenance diet will allow fish to maintain their body weight and immune system to better combat disease. Supplemental feeding will keep the fish healthier and make them hungrier. Convincing fee fishing customers of the benefits of supplemental feeding may be difficult. Fish feeding may discourage customers fishing that fish in general admission lakes as opposed to lakes that charge on a per-pound basis. Night feeding or feeding when the operation is closed may be a good management policy.

Small-scale operations make most of their profits from the sale of concessions and other incidental items. Fishing tackle, worms, chicken livers, shrimp, hot dog and stink baits, soft drinks, and candy are commonly sold. Fishing rods and reels may be sold or rented. Security deposits may help discourage rental equipment theft or vandalism. Some fee fishing operations have holding tanks to sell additional fish to fishermen or to customers not interested in fishing.

Fish cleaning and food vending services may be provided. Adequate restroom facilities are necessary to ensure the success of an operation. Consult your county health department about existing regulations in regards to these types of facilities.

Facility cleanliness, safety and aesthetics are important details that can determine an operation's success. Some facilities provide alternative activities for non fishermen such as games, playgrounds, camping, etc. Providing paved areas or gravel pond banks clear of vegetation near the water's edge will improve accessibility. Benches, picnic tables, shelters, and shade trees may be located a short distance from the pond. Litter containers and lifesaving gear should be readily accessible. Entrance signs that display regulations (such as, the limit of two fishing rods per fishermen, fish size or quantity limits, prohibiting the use of alcohol, and abusive language etc.) are useful management tools.

Many fee fishing operations depend on repeat customers and word of mouth advertising to attract business (Cichra et al 19942). Attractive roadside signs as well as radio, television, and other forms of advertisement will attract customers. A fee fishing operation's success will depend on good management. Customer relations and the ability to run a clean and safe business is critical. It is important to remember that fee fishing customers expect to catch fish!

References

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