Fish Pond Management

Small Scale Solutions for your Farm

NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Do you have a fishable pond or stream on your property?

Are people always asking you for permission to fish?

Purposes and Benefits of Managing for Fishing:

Sport fishing is the number one recreational activity in the United States. Anglers often pay landowners for the opportunity to fish on private lands.

Fishing private ponds can provide anglers an attractive alternative to crowded public lands. This attraction can mean profits for you.

Farm ponds can offer small children and the physically challenged a safe opportunity for catching fish.

Fishing private ponds is often attractive to tourists since most states don't require anglers to obtain a license.

Many fly fishers will pay a premium for a chance to angle on limited-access, private streams.

Licenses and Permits

State and local permits and licenses may be necessary for a fee fishing operation, but the number and types are largely dependent on the approach you are considering. Generally speaking, fish-out ponds require the most permitting and licensing work since they are often the most involved approach to fee fishing. Many states have special permits for fee fishing operations that allow anglers to fish without purchasing a state fishing license.

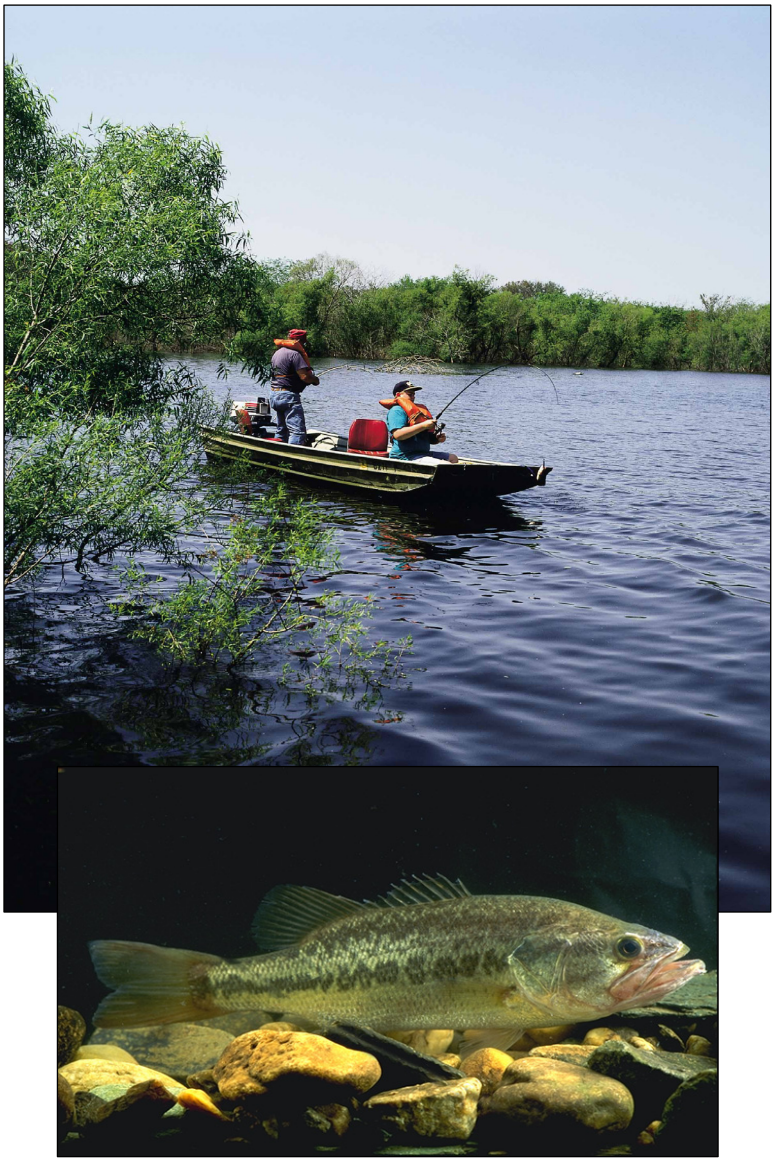
Costs and Benefits:

Costs depend on the initial setting and the size of the operation. Access roads, , stocking, and other management costs may be necessary to get a fee fishing operation off the ground. Liability insurance is highly recommended to protect you from customers who may get injured while using your land. However, a simple waiver can be developed to protect you from lawsuits.

How to Install the Practice:

If your farm pond or stream is already stocked with fish, start-up costs may be limited to developing entrance points (for example, people-friendly gates or parking), payment rates and methods, and signs. Some mowing around the margins of a farm pond may be necessary to provide safe access.

If your pond or stream requires additional stocking, you may need to buy a few catchable fish. Popular species include bass, sunfish, perch, catfish, pickerel, pike, and trout.



Several Approaches

Three basic types of fee fishing operations are in use today: 1) long-term leases; 2) day leases; and 3) “fish-out” ponds, “pound” lakes, or “pay-by-the-pound” lakes. Long-term leasing involves the leasing of a pond, lake, or section of stream by a group or individual for exclusive fishing rights. Day leasing usually entails the collection of a daily fee from anglers who are then granted access to a body of water. Finally, fish-out ponds are stocked with high densities of catchable fish and anglers are charged for each fish caught or for a set daily limit. All of these approaches include interacting with the public to some degree. Read on for further details.

Long-term Leasing

Long-term leases are attractive to individuals or groups who are willing to pay a premium for a quality fishing experience in an aesthetically pleasing environment, well removed from the hustle and bustle of daily life. These leases are also attractive to landowners who wish to minimize the amount of time spent interacting with lessees and/or managing the human aspects of allowing people to use their land. Long-term leases usually allow landowners and the lessee to discuss specific management goals for the body of water in question to either maximize production or the long-term age structure of the fishery. “Trophy” fisheries are often associated with long-term leases, especially on lakes or ponds where the population can be closely managed.

Major costs to the landowner under this approach include finding an appropriate lessee and developing a lease. Leases should be drawn up with the help of an attorney, accountant, and fisheries professional. These documents should outline the specific terms of the lease, including length, who pays for management options and upkeep, conditions for breaking the lease, other privileges such as camping

or swimming, how much liability insurance will be required and who will pay for it, what privileges will be retained by the owner, and other considerations. Annual returns on this type of fee fishing operation can vary between $100 and $100,000 dollars, depending on the size, quality, and location of the fishery.

Day Leasing

Ponds or streams with good fishing adjacent to populated areas are often attractive to anglers looking for a day of recreation. Daily fishing fees charged by landowners can range from $2 to more than $100 per angler for fisheries with larger than average bass or trout. This approach can allow the landowner the ability to regulate the number and types of anglers on the property, as well as the season of use. In addition, this method allows the owner to be very flexible in the use of private water bodies.

Landowners can collect a daily fee and regulate angler access any number of ways. Generally, ponds and streams should be close to the manager or landowner's residence to ensure payment from all anglers. The simplest way to collect fees is to have anglers place them in a locked deposit box as they enter the property. Landowners can also gate and lock the entrance to the fishery and require anglers to check in prior to gaining access. However, this approach can be inconvenient and disruptive to daily life. A final method involves open access to a fishery with occasional visits by the landowner or manager to collect entrance fees. This approach usually requires the pond owner or manager to issue dated tickets or receipts to those who have paid.

Major landowner costs associated with day leasing include collecting daily use fees, collecting garbage, and advertising along major roadways, in local media, or on the internet. If fishing is planned along a stream corridor, minor fencing changes may be necessary to separate anglers from livestock.

Periodic fish stocking may be necessary if the pond or stream cannot naturally produce more fish than are harvested—although a solution to this problem is to only allow catch and release fishing. Stocking costs vary according to the species used and location, but returns most often far outweigh costs.

Finally, ponds and lakes may require additional costs to suppress aquatic weeds, fertilize unproductive ponds, or treat water quality problems.

Fish-out Ponds

Fish-out ponds usually involve the highest level of management, costs, and potential returns of the fee fishing approaches discussed here. These ponds offer a high chance of catching fish, and are thus very attractive to families with small children, the physically challenged individuals, or the elderly. They can be great places to learn to fish and a local source of marketable fresh fish.

Most fish-out pond operations use catfish, sunfish, bass, or rainbow trout since they are reasonably abundant, economical, and easy to transport. Chosen species are stocked and maintained at densities much higher than natural production limits. Thus, periodic stocking is necessary to maintain populations at levels where fish are easy to catch. Ideally, a fish-out operation should have at least two ponds to allow anglers a selection, and to provide additional options for customers if problems arise in any single pond. Numerous half-acre ponds are the perfect setup for a fish-out business since they offer angler choice, easy access, and can be seined (netted) for management purposes.

Fish-out pond operations often require facilities to house personnel who will weigh, measure, and/or count fish to collect fees. These facilities can also provide anglers with concessions, fish processing services, restrooms, bait, tackle, rental equipment, and ice, for example. Fish-out ponds are usually operated during daylight hours on the weekends during warmer weather, although night fishing can also provide a fun angling opportunity—and income for you!

Major costs for fish-out enterprises are highly variable, but will most likely include stocking costs and labor. Help must be onsite during all hours of operation to collect fees, sell concessions, rent tackle, etc. Entry fees of $1 or more per person are common, and customers are often charged from $1 to $5 per pound live weight for fish caught. Additional fees can be collected for fish processing and packing.

Help is Available

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

SMALL SCALE SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR FARM

Technical Help Is Available

Your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office has experienced conservationists that can assist you with fish pond management. They can also help you develop a Conservation Plan to solve other problems you have identified on your farm.

There is no charge for our assistance. Simply call your local office at the number listed below to set up an appointment and we will come to your farm.

You may also be eligible to receive financial assistance, through a state or federal program. Your NRCS office will explain any programs that are available so you can make the best decision for your operation. All NRCS programs and services are voluntary.

Helping People Help the Land

For More Information Contact the:

Natural Resources Conservation Service

60 Quaker Lane, Suite 46
Warwick, RI 02886
(401) 828-1300
Web Address: www.ri.nrcs.usda.gov
E-mail Address: NRCSInfo@ri.usda.gov

NRCS accepts applications on a continuous basis throughout the year.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basic of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs sexual orientation, and marital or familial status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs). Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact the USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Ave., SW, Washington, D.C., 20250-9410, or call (202) 720-5964 (voice) or (202) 720-1127 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

January 2009