

**Bass Regulations Forum**  
**Wildlife District 1 Office**  
**1500 Dublin Road Columbus, OH 43215**  
**December 19, 2009, 10:00 AM - 12:00 noon**

Meeting summary prepared by Angela Latham ([angela.latham@dnr.state.oh.us](mailto:angela.latham@dnr.state.oh.us))

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**Attendees:** Major Ohio bass clubs and tournament organizers, bass anglers and Division of Wildlife representatives (**see attendees on page 6**)

**Objective:** To provide an overview of the current Division of Wildlife (DOW) review and revision process for Ohio bass regulations in reservoirs and gather input regarding tournament bass angler opinions, attitudes, and preferences.

**Meeting Ground Rules (Rich Carter):**

- Respect the opinions of others – expect differences
- Share this information with your club members and tournament participants
- Convey the thoughts of your club members or circuit organizers – we could not invite everyone
- Understand that there are anglers that are not represented by clubs or tournaments circuits

**Welcome/State Update (Ray Petering):**

Ray Petering, Executive Administrator of Fish Management and Research, welcomed everyone and explained the main focus of this year's Bass Regulations Forum. The DOW is committed to routinely meet with club officers and tournament circuit directors to help us communicate better, which is particularly important if we are considering changes that might affect bass anglers and tournaments. At this meeting, the DOW would like to better understand your opinions, attitudes, and preferences regarding regulations and share information that we have reviewed related to results of our regulations during the past several years. Given that a number of invitees could not make the meeting this year, next year we will try scheduling on a different date, perhaps January, after the holidays, or earlier before they are in full swing.

State budget issues continue; however, the 'Wildlife Fund' is not going to be tapped to help balance the budget, per Governor Strickland. Some smaller divisions within the Department of Natural Resources will be disappearing or combining with others in 2010 due to budget constraints and the DOW will continue to downsize a bit, but most of the programs will be maintained.

Lake Erie. On Lake Erie, the 5 fish limit and 14-inch length limit, and spring catch and release regulations for small mouth bass during spawning seem to be helping rebuild the bass population. Details can be expected later on from our Lake Erie staff during the next year or two.

Maintenance of the Asian carp barrier on the Chicago Sanitary and Shipping Canal was successfully completed; however, Asian carp DNA has been discovered on the other side of electric barrier. We continue to hold a regional dialogue with our partners in other Great Lakes States in order to galvanize our efforts to mitigate the threat of Asian carp.

Ohio River. Ohio (OH) met with West Virginia (WV) and Kentucky (KY) in order to work towards regulation unification on the Ohio River. A 6 fish, 12 inch limit on bass for the entire river is possible throughout the river at an undetermined time in the future. We are currently in the process of redoing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with WV on where you can fish with a WV or OH fishing license with respect to Ohio River tributaries and banks. There will be more news on this MOU next year.

Inland Lakes and Reservoirs. We are currently considering adjustments in bass regulations on inland waters, which is the focus of today's meeting as it was last year's meeting. We have extensively reviewed fish management data, angler surveys and bass tournament data during the past year and will continue to work with this information during the coming year. In 2012 or 2013, we may make adjustments in bass regulations in inland waters based on this information and angler feedback.

**Regulation Revision (Scott Hale):**

Evaluating Success of Ohio Bass Regulations - The development of regulations is a science-based process using biological and social information. Regulations present challenges because we are managing for a diversity of interests, different levels of participation, values and perceptions. Our approach has included a review of our history and neighboring state's regulations, gathering and analyzing biological and social data, evaluating options and making recommendations. Prior to the 1900's there were few bass regulations. Starting in 1902, commercial harvest of Ohio bass was prohibited. Statewide inland and Lake Erie bass regulations were introduced in 1940 – 1970's. Starting in 1977, there was the first 14" size limit and from 1977 – present there are statewide and site specific regulations.

The regulations process is a journey built on experience and what we know about these fisheries. There are 3 general reservoir types in Ohio, each with different habitats. They include canal lakes, upground reservoirs, and tributary reservoirs. Current inland bass regulations include 5 fish daily statewide as well as a variety of length limits. 32 lakes have a 12-inch limit, 30 lakes with a 15-inch limit, 5 lakes with an 18-inch limit and 19 lakes with a 12-15 inch slot limit.

Our findings - Unregulated lakes have lower numbers of larger bass while length limit lakes have highest number of keepers (fish 12 inches or greater) as well as larger fish. This could be true for two reasons, either the fishery was already really good or the regulations helped. We believe that many of our regulations have worked as we had hoped.

Length limits can provide benefits by increasing the sizes and numbers of fish available when such limits are biologically appropriate. However, the downside is that in some cases they can have a negative effect on a population by slowing down growth rates in some lakes as fish populations build up. Originally, 12-15-inch slot limits were put in place in areas where bass are crowded to help fish move through the system and create quality fish.

Tournament information about fishing success is represented by less time to catch a fish. We found positive results in tournaments after 12-inch length limits were in place. Also, according to creel surveys, both bass and non-bass anglers approve of slot limits indicating they want to be able to keep a few fish.

The DOW's current bass fishery goals include maximizing numbers and sizes of fish, serving diverse interests of anglers, creating a fair distribution of opportunities and preventing over harvest. Potential strategies that we would like to discuss include:

1. A statewide regulation of 12" length limit and 5 fish daily limit to provide many 12" bass with traditional harvest opportunities.
2. On a subset of reservoirs, where 15" or slot-length limits are currently in place, or other reservoirs, a 15"-length limit, 4-fish split daily limit, where 2 may be above and 2 below 15". The intent of this regulation is to maximize catch rates of 12-15" bass, promote larger fish and allow limited harvest by slightly thinning out bass in the 10-15 inch size range in order to maintain good growth and body condition of bass.
3. On a very small subset of reservoirs, a 14-20"-slot limit, 3-fish split daily limit, where 1 may be above 20" and 2 below 14" in certain areas for a trophy bass fishery with limited harvest. In our view, this is a "trophy" regulation and would be limited to a very few lakes with trophy potential, likely smaller lakes where annual reproduction is good.

Next step –

- Identify specific lakes that need improvement, look at angler surveys, tournament data and internal review and revision.
- Pick and choose carefully where regulations would work and implement when there is a lake that has potential.

Follow-up Discussion -

**Jeff Tipple** asked, given these data, if the state can target specific lakes and tell folks to keep smaller fish. **Scott** responded that for doing so to be successful, sizes that anglers are interested in harvesting need to be available to harvest. The current slot length limits only allow harvest of fish less than 12 inches or greater than 15 inches, so they tend to act more like 15-inch minimum length limits since few anglers will keep the smaller fish. This is why the Division thinks a split daily limit may help thin populations better than 12-15-inch slot length limits.

**Rory Franks** stated that a split bag limit would be logistically difficult for a tournament and people would avoid holding tournaments at those lakes. **Scott** suggested that it would actually create an opportunity to keep a couple fish under 15 inches that has not been possible in the past on 15-inch length limit lakes. He also suggested that using a 15-inch bump board should make it pretty easy to judge putting two under and two over in the livewell.

**Rory** also wanted to know if the Division is considering closed seasons in the future and tournament exemptions for new regulations. **Scott** remarked that closed seasons are not beneficial in inland waters and are more associated with cultural issues. **Ray Petering** added that the “catch and release” season for Lake Erie bass fishing resulted from clear biological conditions associated with the invasion of gobies into Lake Erie, and represents a unique circumstance. The DOW does not see tournament exemptions from regulations as a likely option given the importance of treating all anglers fairly and the difficulty it might present in law enforcement.

**Jeff** asked about how channel catfish daily limits have worked out (6 fish per day on lakes under 700 acres). **Scott** indicated that these daily limits on catfish were developed to help fairly distribute the catch of stocked channel catfish, rather than to address management of a natural population.

**Todd Thompson** asked if the fishery (reservoir/lake) itself mandates the size of the fish available with respect to the aquatic vegetation, habitat, food...etc. For example, certain bodies of water establish a shallow fish population while others have fish that have adjusted to the water column and grow to be bigger fish. **Scott** stated that larger, offshore fish will move shallow when conditions are right, but do so more routinely in the spring during spawning season. For example, electrofishing surveys find mixed size ranges in the shallows during spring. These are the same fish that you find in deeper water later in the year. He added that it is absolutely true that there are limitations associated with the nutrients and habitat of a body of water that influence the numbers and sizes of bass available. However, regulations allow us to take advantage of what potential opportunities a body of water has to offer, and in some cases, maximize the quality of the fishing. Regardless of potential of a lake, we try to make the most of the opportunities provided.

**Todd** asked why a 15" length limit would still be in place in a given lake if it wasn't working. **Scott** responded that we are looking comprehensively at our data to allow us to make these exact types of adjustments. If a regulation is not having the intended effects, we would want to make changes or remove it. Doing so takes several years of data, and we have a great deal of those data available at this time.

**Bob Townsend** asked if the DOW is looking at habitat quality in the bass population assessments. **Scott** said that the DOW has been working on a reservoir classification system which looks at physical characteristics and helps group lakes by similar function and potential.

The Division anticipates using this system to help with future regulation strategies, particularly when looking at regulations on a lake-specific basis.

**Bob** asked how regulations affect upground reservoirs or lakes that don't have good populations already. **Scott** replied that regulations take advantage of what that body of water can provide (that is, its potential). Regardless of potential of a lake, we make the most of the opportunities provided. In the case of upground reservoirs, many of which have poor habitat for nest-building spawners like largemouth bass, opportunities tend to be limited for hope of improving bass fishing.

**Bob** asked that, given some anglers view catch and release of bass as gospel, does the DOW think that people are keeping more than they say (such as responses that the DOW sees in on-line or creel survey results)? **Scott** said that he thinks this is possible, although surveys do show that some people are keeping bass, and perhaps saying they keep more than we would have suspected.

**Bob** remarked that on smaller lakes, split bag limits would increase handling and time on the measuring board, which is in contrast to what his organization is trying to accomplish. For example, they are looking at creating an 8 fish daily limit (per 2 anglers) in their tournaments to reduce handling. **Scott** suggested that 15-inch bump boards should allow quick measurement and that measurement issues may not even be relevant until you catch your third fish under a split limit approach.

**Bob** asked how electrofishing surveys compare to angler surveys... (Do we just suck at fishing?, Bob's words!)...is data showing fishing is good where we think we are wasting our time and money...can you share that data so we can show organizations? **Scott** said that we try to share this information, and very often welcome anglers to join DOW electrofishing crews to see what we find. Also, the fishing forecast is posted on the Division's website at [www.wildohio.com](http://www.wildohio.com) every year.

**Bob** asked why the "4 fish" in the suggested split limit. **Scott** replied that statistical modeling information usually reveals that for daily limits to affect total harvest, they need to be set very low. The split limit of two fish "below" may provide enough harvest to effectively thin fish built up below a length limit, but prevent potential overharvest of larger fish.

**Bob** asked if how the fishery is used, and by who, should be considered in regulation suggestions. Is the regulation worth it because of how the fishery is being used? For example, smaller lakes could be managed for bass for non-tournament anglers. **Scott** stated that the DOW wants to provide a variety of opportunities to meet the needs of a diversity of anglers, which is why we do public surveys. These surveys help us find out how people will feel about different regulations and the types of fishing opportunities they are intended to create. The DOW studies the biology of a fish population and tries to apply regulations that meet fisheries objectives in a way that the public supports.

**Bob** suggested that the DOW should be open to considering closed seasons. **Ray** responded that the DOW will look at anything if it will work, but that if we aren't using something such as closed seasons at this point, it's probably not needed or biologically recommended.

**Barry Davis** stated that a 5 fish 12" limit is fine and that a split daily bag limit on lakes where we already have 15" limit would be a positive, because it allows anglers to keep other sizes of fish and would promote fishing. **Scott** agreed, and views this approach a benefit to tournament anglers, non-tournament anglers that want to keep a few fish and the DOW in managing bass fisheries.

**Todd** added that his organization is focusing on recruitment by inviting new anglers and allowing them to participate in tournaments as a non-member.

**Barry** suggested that there is a need for more idle speed regulations. **Ray** indicated that we have seen good compliance and agree that when possible, this approach expands opportunities.

**Todd** asked if the DOW had a point of completion for the muskie stocking program. He remarked that several tournament anglers are catching a lot of muskie and some bass caught by tournament anglers have some scarring from muskie bites. **Scott** responded that the muskie program requires annual stocking to maintain the fishery given that very little natural reproduction occurs in Ohio reservoirs. The DOW raises approximately 20,000 muskie a year to stock 9 program lakes at a rate of 1 advanced fingerling per acre. Stocking rates have not changed since the early 90's, although Clear Fork Reservoir has been periodically stocked at 2 fish per acre to help build a broodstock population. Muskie fishing was particularly good at Alum Creek this year and the DOW knows that, but does not believe that the muskie fishery there has a negative impact on bass populations. Muskie strongly prefer eating soft rayed prey such as gizzard shad, suckers and carp, and although they may occasionally eat a bass, or attempt to, population level effects are highly unlikely. The DOW monitors muskie and bass fisheries at Alum Creek and would respond if a problem was identified.

**Open Forum Topics & Discussion (Rich Carter):**

- Web store items of interest – 1. GPS coordinates for boat ramps, 2. Maps for smaller lakes, 3. Larger, laminated maps, 4. Compliance items for boats such as whistles, flags, flares, 5. Hunter orange nail polish (Bob really, really wants this!).
- Website - Tournament information is a great management tool for biologists to use in managing bass fisheries. Please submit your information on the Ohio bass Tournament Reporting Database at [www.wildohio.com](http://www.wildohio.com), click on 'Fishing', 'Angler Programs' and 'Ohio Bass Tournament Database'.
- Tournament Weigh In & Fish Handling Care - Fish handling standards the most important to address as a group. Bass drove the catch and release paradigm on a national level. Now we have sophisticated equipment. Bass anglers are often considered the leaders in conservation and youth projects. You are the source of information to bass anglers, initiatives will be supported by others and we will expect you to help promote standards that we agree upon as a group.

State wide handling standards - there are differences at the club level as well as at the regional and state level...Defining fish care - weigh in - public sees this but most occurs in the boat before weigh in and in live well care.

Where do we go from here and what steps - look for volunteers that want to participate in the development of guidelines and then move forward from there...Bob was recommended for this job...go to OBFN website and e-mail bob( titled 'fish care') with suggestions to get started.

**Suggestions Relative to Statewide Handling Standards:**

- Monitor oxygen levels in live wells and bags
- Create incentives to participate in a permitting system to open lakes for tournaments and then have basic standards for fish care
- Get away from holding fish in the bag or limit the number of bags by having tanks run by tournament directors
- Don't allow culling of dead fish
- Don't use chemicals, just be simple and turn the live well on
- Review updated care standards from bassmaster.com
- Post recommend guidance for live release of bass on the Division's website
- Limit the number of fish in a bag
- Have a fish handling code of conduct
- Teach people how to properly care for the fish

- Talk about care standards to anglers before each tournament based on conditions

**Closing Remarks (Ray Petering):** It is critical to make sure the DOW knows what you want in terms of bass fishing in Ohio. We are limited in terms of acres of water and habitat but there is plenty of room to work toward improving opportunities. In some cases, regulations can have a positive effect. As systems get more complex, then the impact of structuring harvest has less of an effect. We want to identify where we can and can't move the needle. A lot of this information also comes from you. We want to balance using regulations to create quality opportunities and still maintain your tournament circuits, and this can be accomplished by good communication. In the future, we can talk about specific lakes and regulations. We will identify where potential exists for improvement, and you can provide us with input regarding potential direction. If we don't agree, we may certainly be able to meet in the middle. You send us tournament information and we will share data and try to set a meeting date for next year. We want you in the middle of how decisions are made. We appreciate you being leaders in conservation. To end the meeting on a positive note, license sales have increased 3 out of the past 4 years, and in 2009 they increased 6.4%.

Thanks for joining us today!

**Attendees**

<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Representative(s)</b>
American Bass Anglers – Ohio Division	K. Barry Davis
LaDue Bass Series	Rory Franks
Ohio B.A.S.S. Federation Nation	Todd Thompson
Ohio B.A.S.S. Federation Nation	Bob Townsend
USA Bassin – Ohio Division: Rocky Fork/Deer Creek/Caesar Creek	James Siders
Inland Bass Guide	Jeff Tipple

<b>Division of Wildlife - Position</b>	<b>Name</b>
Executive Administrator, Fish Management and Research	Ray Petering
Inland Fisheries Program Administrator	Scott Hale
Fish Management Supervisor, District 1 (Columbus)	Rich Carter
Fisheries Biologist, District 4 (Athens)	Don Swatzel
Administrative Assistant	Angela Latham