

Southern  
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# Fee Fishing

## Location, Site Development and Other Considerations

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Important ingredients for a successful fee-fishing operation are: having a good location, knowing your clientele, providing good facilities and services, and operating like any profitable business.

The site must be carefully chosen, developed and promoted to attract a large group of anglers, and once there, for them to have a successful and enjoyable fishing experience. The staff must work with the customers to provide consistently good catches in a pleasant atmosphere. This fact sheet provides information which can be used as the basis for locating, developing and operating such a facility.

Additional information can be found in SRAC Publication



Numbers 480, *Fee-fishing Ponds: Management of Food Fish and Water Quality* and 483, *Fish-out Ponds: Economics*.

### Location

Most successful fee-fishing operations are located within 30 to 50 miles of population centers with 50,000 or more people. Proximity to popular fishing areas or other types of public attractions increases an operation's chance for success. Locating in a high-traffic area (major highway or intersection) increases the number of people who pass by and have a chance to see the operation.

Do not locate near an existing fee-fishing operation unless you are confident that there are enough customers to support more than one facility. The majority of anglers at urban fee-fishing establishments drive 15 miles or less, while anglers at rural fee-fishing operations commonly drive more than 15 miles.

Ponds should also be located in a "natural" setting screened from urban distractions, and have easy access and plenty of parking. Trees effectively screen roads, parking areas and buildings from the fishing area. Other considerations in selecting a site include having soils suitable for constructing ponds and having an adequate supply of high quality water. For more information, refer to SRAC Publication Numbers 100, 101 and 102 on site selection and construction of levee and watershed ponds.

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## Clientele

Fee fishing appeals to experienced anglers who simply like to fish but are limited by time or resources (e.g., owning a boat), families with small children, the physically handicapped, single parent families and the elderly. Fee fishing is attractive to tourists or individuals who only occasionally fish because in most states no license is required to fish in a fee-fishing pond.

Fee fishing provides the excitement and challenge of fishing with improved chances of catching fish. Fish-out ponds are especially appealing to families with children because of the ease of catching fish. They are an excellent place to take someone who is learning to fish.

Many patrons will have little fishing experience. Nationwide, most patrons are family groups (parents with children), groups of family members and friends, or individual men. Many customers will be retired or disabled. Repeat customers will represent a large proportion of the clientele.

The four leading reasons why people go fee fishing are:

- good fishing;
- as a family activity;
- abundance of amenities available; and
- it is a fun and safe activity.

## Advertising

Fee fishing must be planned as a business. Advertising can greatly enhance the probability of success. Many forms of advertising are used by fee-fishing operators, including word-of-mouth, roadside signs, newspaper advertisements, television and radio commercials, local shopper and visitor guides, bumper stickers, fliers, direct mail, and hats and clothing with imprinted advertising.

The most effective means of advertising are word-of-mouth and signs. Most customers come based on word-of-mouth, so be sure that customers are satisfied.

For every group of anglers which has a good fishing experience, as many as 8 to 10 additional groups will show up at an operation. It is a definite advantage for an operation to have been around for a while so that customers get to know the facility and its operators. Having a good relationship between the management and customers is important to ensure that people will refer others to the operation. Professionally-painted attractive signs, large enough to be easily seen and well located, are usually worth the expense. During the start-up period of a new operation, other forms of advertising can also be effective. Advertisements should include directions; facilities, services and activities available; schedule of operation; and fees.

## Permits

Permits must be obtained for surface and ground water (wells) rights, surface water storage (pond and ditch construction), construction of buildings and for meeting any additional county or municipal regulations. Permits may also be required to sell live fish, bait and concessions, and for construction and operation of restroom and fish cleaning facilities. Employees involved in selling food and cleaning fish should obtain state health certificates.

Many states also have special permits for the operation of fee-fishing facilities. These permits allow customers to fish without having to purchase state fishing licenses.

## Developing a successful fee-fishing operation

A fee-fishing operator should always keep in mind that, primarily, he/she is providing recreation, not just selling fish. To successfully provide quality recreation, the operator must pay close attention to facility design and security, pond construction, fishing success, concessions, daily operation, promotion, safety and aesthetics. A fee-fishing operation is a people-oriented business that requires

a person with the personality, motivation and resources to deal with the public. It is not that much different from operating a restaurant; people come for enjoyment and expect service.

## Facility design and security

Security and control of access must be kept in mind when designing a fee-fishing operation. Good security will increase customer safety and decrease vandalism, unwanted entrance during off hours and theft. In most cases, complete fencing of the pond area with only one entrance is recommended. Paths, fences, gates and landscaping should lead the customers from the parking area to the entrance, usually the concessions area, where entry and exit to the ponds can be supervised. This design ensures that entrance fees are collected. Entrance fees help to reduce loitering by individuals who do not intend to fish. As anglers leave the facility, fees can be collected for all fish that were caught, and coolers, pails and other storage containers can be inspected to reduce theft.

Concessions and restrooms should be located in the entrance and exit area. Sales of concessions can be increased by funneling traffic past concession areas. Restrooms should be located in sight of the cashier to allow for good supervision. Restrooms and other out-of-the-way places are a temptation for some customers to dispose of fish that they have caught and do not want to purchase.

Security lighting of more remote parts of the ponds will help keep out unwanted night-time intruders and provide a safer and more convenient fishing environment for late-night anglers. Lighting also allows extended hours of operation.

Since a fee-fishing business is often operated close to the owner's home so that the pond and concession areas can be closely watched, it is important to

make private areas off limits to customers. Areas open to fishing and associated activities should be clearly identified to protect the privacy of family members and neighbors.

Paths leading to the ponds will minimize the effects of heavy foot traffic. Special considerations must be taken in design and construction for physically-handicapped anglers. Often, inexpensive minor design modifications will greatly improve access for this group of anglers. **Keep safety in mind!**

### **Pond size and construction**

Every imaginable shape, size and construction technique have been used for fee-fishing ponds. The following are some important considerations that a prospective or expanding fee-fishing operator should consider when building or renovating ponds. Pond size and construction are important to the overall success of a fee-fishing operation.

Ponds should be constructed with:

- a good clay base and dam core
- smooth, even bottoms with no stumps or obstructions
- properly constructed drains
- proper bank, side and bottom slopes
- accessible banks
- levees that are wide enough to allow vehicular traffic for stocking, harvest by seining and routine maintenance
- emergency spillways

Ponds without a proper clay base or dam core will leak making it difficult to manage or maintain water levels. Ponds should be constructed with a drainage system through the dam and smooth bottoms sloping toward the drain without obstructions, so they can easily be seined and drained (see SRAC Publication Number 480 *(Fee-fishing Ponds: Management of Food Fish and Water Quality)*).

Rectangularly-shaped ponds allow a larger shoreline-to-water ratio than square ponds, thus providing more shoreline for fishing a given size pond. Irregularly-shaped ponds give people the feeling that they are fishing under a more or less natural setting; however, margins should not be so irregular that the pond cannot be effectively seined. Optimum pond depth is between 3 to 5 feet, except where icing is a problem. Those ponds should be 5 to 8 feet in depth. Fish do well at this depth and seining is simplified. Avoid pond areas with depths of less than 2 feet to reduce aquatic weed problems.

Pond banks need to be grassed or sodded and should be wide, relatively flat, but gently sloping toward the pond. This allows for easy access, room to accommodate the movement and comfort of customers, and quick drainage of water after rains. Ideally, ponds should be constructed with minimum slope of the banks down to the water so patrons can fish at the water's edge and land fish without problems. Finally, if the pond receives run-off during rainfall, it should have an emergency spillway. It may be necessary to build an escapement barrier across the emergency spillway to keep large fish from leaving the pond during heavy rains. For

assistance in pond construction contact your local USDA Soil Conservation Service Office.

Pond size is also important. Small ponds are better from a management and fishing success standpoint than large ponds. Ponds of one quarter to one acre in size can be readily managed. Ponds of this size can be quickly stocked to optimum levels, seined or treated for disease or to improve water quality, and can be intensively fished from the banks. Ponds larger than two acres generally do not allow complete fishing access unless they have been specifically designed with earthen jetties, piers or a highly convoluted shoreline (see "Utilizing existing ponds" section which follows).

Intensively managed fee-fishing operations should have multiple ponds. This enables the manager to better control fishing success and to isolate and treat diseases or other problems. If several ponds are available, the manager can move patrons to ponds where fish are actively biting, assuring successful and satisfied customers. Fish can be moved from one pond to another to increase densities and catchability. Also, fish of unknown condition (i.e., purchased off-farm) can be isolated in a separate pond away from other fish so there is no chance of disease transmission. If a single pond



*Concessions can increase profit potential.*

in a multiple pond fee-fishing enterprise develops a problem (e.g., disease), the manager can get the problem under control in that pond without having to close the entire operation.

## Water source

All ponds must have a water source. Sources could include rainfall, a reservoir, stream or well. Rainfall can be undependable; therefore, these ponds should have an alternative water source. Many fee-fishing operations have a reservoir that traps rainfall which is used to fill and maintain the fish-out ponds. The reservoir may also be fished. Ponds can be filled with water from a nearby stream, but first check on state laws that regulate use of public water. Surface water sources may introduce wild fish, parasites and diseases. The best water source is a well which produces good quality water. Wells should be sized to the pond acreage. For filling ponds, a well of at least 40 gallons per minute per acre of pond is needed. A well that produces 20 gallons per minute per acre of pond is sufficient to maintain water levels. Finally, always have well water checked for its quality before relying on it as a water source.

## Concessions

Concessions can be the most profitable segment of a fee-fishing enterprise. Concessions should be within easy access of the ponds, attractively maintained, and can include some or all of the following:

- bait
- fishing tackle
- food, snacks and drinks
- ice
- newspapers
- cookbooks, fish batter and seasonings
- hats and clothing
- first aid supplies

- rental equipment (rods, reels, chairs, umbrellas, etc.)
- live and dressed fish (fresh/frozen)
- fish cleaning services

Concessions should be viewed as not only a chance to make money, but also an opportunity to provide the customer with essential services. Many patrons will arrive having forgotten critical supplies; without a concession that carries these items, patrons will be forced to return home or leave to purchase the items elsewhere. A selection of bait (worms, crickets and stink-bait) and fishing tackle (hooks, line, sinkers, corks and lures) is most essential.

Many concessions also rent fishing equipment, chairs and giant umbrellas. Cane poles or spin casting gear are most commonly used. Deposits help discourage rental equipment vandalism and theft. Food is also common, ranging from drinks and snacks to complete meals. Sundries such as sunscreen, bandaids, aspirin and antiseptics should also be sold. Often, operations sell imprinted caps, sunglasses and T-shirts. These become walking advertisements for the establishment. A holding tank can provide live fish for individuals who do not fish, but want fresh fish for home consumption, and for anglers who want more fish than they were able to catch.

Adequate restroom facilities are necessary to insure the success of an operation. They must be kept clean. Consult with your County Health Department about appropriate regulations.

Finally, fish cleaning services are popular. Many anglers like to catch fish, but do not like to clean them and will pay for this service. Fee-fishing operations commonly charge \$0.25 to \$0.75 per pound to clean fish for the customer. Before starting a fish cleaning service, check with your County Health Department about sanitation standards for fish processing and

waste disposal. Dressed fish, fresh and/or frozen, are also commonly sold. Selling dressed fish means anyone can take fish home for dinner. Consider accepting food stamps.

Non-anglers can be provided with alternative activities and conveniences such as game rooms, playgrounds, picnic areas and camping facilities. Seriously consider the possible financial return on such investments and potential increased liability and maintenance cost before providing these facilities.

## Times of operation

For most of the southern United States, the primary fishing season runs from the middle of March through early November, with Memorial Day to Labor Day being the peak period. People have the urge to fish and fish are generally most willing to bite during this period. Sales as high as 4,000 pounds per week, most of which are sold on weekends, have been recorded at some operations. Both anglers and fish slow down in the heat of the summer. Southern states have an advantage over northern states in that catfish will often bite during the winter, especially if it is mild. Northern operations, however, can provide anglers with good fishing through much of the fall, winter and spring by stocking species such as rainbow trout which prefer cold water. Ice coverage can stop pond fishing, but aerators can keep ponds open and fishable.

Fish-out operations are generally open on weekends. Thursday through Sunday are peak days. Some operations are open seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Daylight hours are most common, with many operations remaining open after dark especially on weekends. A good plan is to start out slowly, being open only on weekends, and then to expand operating hours as business increases.



Regulations should be in obvious places.

## Signs

Signs should clearly direct customers to parking areas and from parking areas to the entrance of the pond area. At the entrance, signs should provide all information needed by potential customers including prices, fishing regulations, times of operation and activity rules. Prices for fish, fishing and fish cleaning, along with other services should be clearly displayed to avoid confusion and later misunderstandings. All rules should be posted.

Swimming and the use of alcohol should be prohibited for liability reasons. All fish caught should be kept to prevent loss of fish due to

delayed hooking and handling mortality.

Other items that can or should be on the signs include:

- prohibiting the use of abusive language
- indicating which ponds are open for fishing
- indicating any fishing gear restrictions
- prohibiting snagging, minnow traps and live bait
- asking customers to report anyone breaking these rules

These rules, along with information on how to fish and business name, location and times of operation, can be included in a pamphlet that is given to all customers. Anglers can refer to this while fishing, and take it home as a form of advertising to later encourage them and others to return.

## Promotion

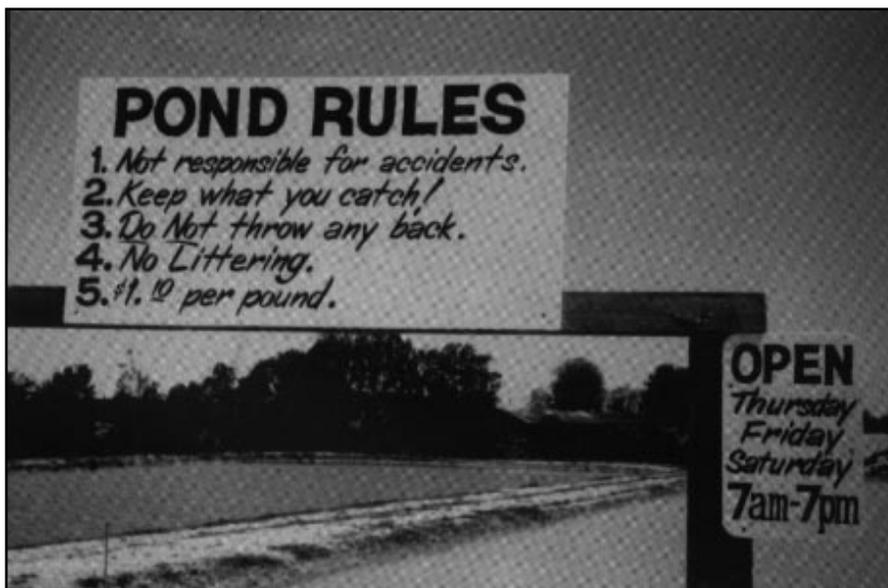
Night fishing and group rates, including free entrance fees, should be offered to the elderly, handicapped and youth groups such as those sponsored by churches, schools and scout organizations. You may want to award prizes for the largest fish, most fish or for catching a specially-marked fish when groups are fishing.

Some operations further promote their business with regular customers by tagging a few "trophy" fish and offering prizes to any angler that catches one. Posting instant photographs of customers with their catch, especially large fish or large numbers of fish, will bring people back to show their friends the photograph, and it will encourage other anglers to return. Your imagination is the limit when promoting your business.

## Safety and liability

Liability insurance is highly recommended because customers can be injured while on the property. Product liability insurance covers you if an individual gets sick eating fish that they take home. Insurance coverage is often required by the landowner, if different from the operator, and by your banker. Generally, the more people that you deal with, the higher your insurance rates. All reasonable steps should be taken to avoid negligence. Alcohol should not be allowed on the premises because of the many problems and questions of liability that it can cause.

Equipment must be placed so that it can operate effectively, yet provide little inconvenience and potential danger to customers. Electrical aerators also pose the problem of combining the hazards of electricity with that of water. First aid and life saving equipment should be readily available. All areas should be kept mowed to reduce habitat for snakes and other pests. Fire ant and wasp control programs should be maintained to reduce injuries due to



Limited entry times and well-publicized liability statements are good practices.

insect bites and make fishing more comfortable.

### **Aesthetics and comfort**

The area in and around the ponds should be aesthetically pleasing. The grounds should be well kept: grass mowed, banks maintained and litter removed. Covered trash containers should be readily available and frequently emptied. Provide benches and picnic tables in shaded areas for customers by planting fast-growing trees or constructing small shade pavilions or awnings. Good seating and shade will improve customer comfort and increase the length of their stay. Fee fishing is a people-oriented business; provide patrons with good fishing in a pleasing setting and they will be return customers.

### **Utilizing existing ponds**

Many existing ponds, while not ideal for fee fishing, can be successfully used. In fact, many fee-fishing operations in the Southeast use old hill ponds.

The problems with using existing hill ponds are generally associat-

ed with design. These ponds usually will not have proper access around the entire pond, many will be too large (usually greater than 2 acres) to be fished effectively, and most cannot be easily drained or seined. Ponds that cannot be completely fished, and those that cannot be drained or seined, accumulate large numbers of "hook-shy" or non-catchable fish (see SRAC Publication Number 480, *Fee-fishing Ponds: Management of Food Fish and Water Quality*). Thirty to fifty percent of the catfish in a pond can be "hook-shy." This accumulation of fish reduces fishing success and limits the number of additional fish that can be stocked into the pond. As fishing success drops, so will customer satisfaction.

Although access and fishing success can be a problem, larger hill ponds can be attractive because of their aesthetic beauty and the perception of a larger, less crowded environment. Overwhelming fishing success may not be the most important aspect of a customer's fishing trip. Some customers come to enjoy the experience of fishing and the beauty of uncrowded natural surroundings.

Many times large hill ponds are managed as "ticket lakes" rather than as "fish-out lakes." Fewer fish are stocked and most profit is derived from concessions. The entrance fee goes to purchase fish for restocking. Large hill ponds managed as ticket lakes can be profitable, particularly as supplemental income.

Remember, fee fishing is a recreation business. Success will be based on repeat customers and good word-of-mouth advertising. A repeat customer is one who caught fish and "had a good time." An attractive, well-managed pond with consistently good fishing and friendly service will keep customers coming back!

### **Additional sources of information**

Contact your county Extension office or State Fisheries Extension Specialist for more information on fee fishing in your state. Many states have Extension publications which deal specifically with the topic of fee fishing or with related topics such as pond construction, fish production, management of water quality and fish health.

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