

False River, Spillway get new fishing rules

BY JOE MACALUSO

Advocate Outdoors writer

South Louisiana freshwater fishermen will have new regulations in the coming months covering two legendary fishing spots.

False River, once acknowledged to be among the top five lakes in the country for numbers of gamefish per acre, has been in the center of a 20-year battle. Fishermen and environmental groups are fighting landowners and efforts by the Pointe Coupee Police Jury to control water levels in the wake of its decision to allow an increase the oxbow lake's watershed.

The Atchafalaya Spillway is the other fishing hole, a 60-mile long tangle of bayous and canals fed by the Atchafalaya River. It's the nation's largest overflow swamp and soaks up tens of thousands of angling and hunting hours every year.

The Spillway's tete-a-tete between some fishermen and state biologists is 19 years old and comes after a decision to increase the size limit on black bass after 1992's Hurricane Andrew killed an estimated 175 million fish, among them 5 million bass. State fisheries biologists determined that a 14-inch minimum size for black bass was the best way to restore the population to spillway waters.

The push at False River is the result of fishermen pushing for changes, recommendations state legislators Major Thibaut and Ricky Ward hammered out with state agencies and Pointe Coupee Parish administrator Jim Bello.

"We've been able to make some headway," Tommy Bryan wrote in a letter to The Advocate Outdoors. "It seems at long last the Police Jury, (and Louisiana) Wildlife and Fisheries are all on the same page and moving forward to try to restore the lake. In addition to an overall master plan called the False River Watershed Restoration Plan, a commission has been established to monitor the progress and make recommendations to improve the plan as it moves forward."



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Photo provided by DEBBIE COMEAUX. New False River fishing season Gene David, left, and Brent Bonadona show off the hefty bass they caught to win a recent springtime tournament on False River. Years of heavy siltation and an increasing population of 'rough fish,' species like buffalo and gar, have brought a decline in what was one of the state's most abundant gamefish lakes. A 'rough fish' season begins this year on the oxbow lake near New Roads in Pointe Coupee Parish and runs through the late fall into the winter months.

Bryan singled out Representative Thibaut and Senator Ward and Bello for initial moves to rehab the 12-mile-long oxbow at New Roads.

Bryan noted two major moves that will begin in the next weeks: “The boat traffic buoys in the flats will be moved out to the 6-foot level to prevent boats from continuously agitating the silt laying on the bottom and also to protect skiers and swimmers from being injured in the shallow water. This is a win for the fish and the boaters.

“Second, the long-awaited rough-fish season will begin Nov. 1 and last until the last day of February each year,” Bryan wrote.

The increasing number of species like buffalo, gar, carp, freshwater drum and other species not considered to be gamefish has reduced the gamefish population to the point where bass, sac-a-lait and bream fishermen have reduced their activity on the lake.

State Inland Fisheries Section chief Mike Wood addressed LDWF’s moves in the Atchafalaya Spillway.

In an open letter to bass anglers, Wood indicated the LDWF has completed what he called an “extensive study” on the 14-inch minimum length limit for spillway bass.

“Through this study, we have determined that the regulation does not produce larger bass. The Atchafalaya Basin and adjacent waters, including Lakes Verret, (Lake) Palourde and Fausse Pointe, have unique characteristics that will just not allow it,” Wood wrote.

Wood referred anglers to the LDWF’s website for the full report:

<http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/fishing/ldwf-releases-report-14-minimum-length-limit-largemouth-bass-atchafalaya-basin>.

He asked interested parties to review the document so they understand the information and can provide input when the opportunity arises in the coming months.

Wood wrote that the initial post-Andrew recovery plan was to have been in place for two years.

“The Atchafalaya Basin fishery rebounded quickly after Andrew, and many credited the regulation as the primary factor for the recovery. There was also optimism among anglers and biologists that the regulation might increase the number of large bass in the basin,” he wrote, adding that spillway fish kills after Hurricane Lili in 2002 and Hurricane Gustav in 2008 “left many of those protected bass dead ...

healthy and vibrant bass populations were eliminated with each storm.”

A quick review of the report showed Wood’s team found that springtime floods have a direct effect on bass spawning success or failure, and that growth rates of spillway bass are not as rapid as bass in other Louisiana waters.

The report indicated that some spillway bass don’t grow to 14 inches long until they are three years old and that few spillway bass survive past age 5.

“The basin still has a very healthy bass population, but the combination of slow growth and short life spans lends to smaller bass,” he reported.

Wood said public input will be necessary to adjust the length and creel limits for new regulations.

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