



# Fee-Fishing Considerations

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Fact Sheet 11

Forestry and Natural Resources

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Fee fishing, paying for the right to fish and/or paying for any fish that are caught, is rapidly becoming popular among anglers. As fishing pressure on our public waters is increasing at a rapid rate, many anglers are looking for alternative places to fish. Fishing in private ponds could help fill a portion of this need and could provide a source of income to landowners. There are approximately 100 fee-fishing operations in South Carolina today.

There are 3 basic types of fee-fishing operations: 1) long-term leasing, 2) day leasing, and 3) fish-out operations. With a long-term lease, exclusive fishing rights to a private pond or lake can be leased on a long-term basis to an individual or group of individuals in a similar manner that is done with hunting leases. Management of the pond is often the responsibility of the lessee (those paying the fee). Day leasing of ponds involves collecting a daily use fee from the fisherman. Pond management is the responsibility of the operator or pond owner. Normally, in both long-term and day leasing operations, only those fish (usually largemouth bass and bluegill) that are produced within the pond through natural production are made available to the angler. In some cases, especially with day leasing, the ponds may be stocked with catchable-size fish such as channel catfish. Fish-out operations ("put and take" or "pay by the pound") operations involves stocking a pond with fish and then charging the angler for each fish that is caught. Fish populations in this type of operation must be artificially maintained at high levels by regular stocking of catchable-size fish, usually catfish. The volume of clientele varies tremendously with each type of operation. Ponds that are managed under natural production, as in a long-term lease, cannot withstand continuously heavy fishing pressure. In contrast, day leasing or fish-out operations can accommodate a larger number of clientele since fish are being artificially stocked on a regular basis.

Fee-fishing is appealing to a wide variety of individuals including those anglers who like to fish, but are limited by time or resources such as owning a boat, single parent families, and the elderly. In many cases, existing farm ponds can be incorporated into farm or forestry operations with little effort to enhance profitability. Ponds are often present, but are under-utilized. Most farms have the potential to construct or improve existing ponds for fishing.

## Considerations in Developing a Fee-Fishing Operation

Successful fee-fishing operators market more than just fish. The value of the recreational experience received by the angler far outweighs the value of the fish. Fee-fishing experiences, as with other types of recreational pursuits, consist of 5 basic parts: anticipation, travel to the site, on-site experience, travel from the site, and recollection of the overall experience. A fee-fishing operation should satisfy all of these 5 parts. Repeat customers are important to the success of an operation. Fee-fishing operations should strive to provide consistently good catches or the business will eventually fail. Pond owners should remember that "good fishing" is the number one reason why anglers who pay to fish prefer fee fishing to fishing at public areas. Other aspects that fishermen like about fee-fishing operations are listed in (Table 1). Fisherman who participate in fee-fishing operations also had suggestions for operators (Table 2).

Location is also a major consideration when deciding whether to establish a fee-fishing operation. Most studies indicate that successful fee-fishing operations are located within 20 to 25 miles of a major urban area. Fish-out operations and day leasing may do best located in close proximity to urban areas. In choosing a location, potential competition from other fee-fishing operations should be taken into account. The specific site must also be suitable for pond construction and have a reliable source of good quality water.

Poor management is a major cause of failure of fee-fishing operations. Poor pond management can result in low catches in fee-fishing operations and consequently result in business failure. In addition, the landowner/operator must have good business skills and the ability to work with people.

Design aspects of fee-fish facilities that handle a large number of clientele are important. Parking lots should be located away from the pond(s). Access from the parking areas must be controlled. Landscaping, fencing, and a pathway can be used to control angler movement into and out of the operation.

In fish-out operations, access from the parking area to the pond is usually controlled through a service area where fees are collected.

**Table 1. What fisherman like about fee fishing operations (fish-out operations)**

<b>Good fishing</b>	
• easy to catch fish	• assured catch
• good tasting fish	• lots of ponds
• fair prices	• like catfish
• good fishing in bad weather	
<b>Aesthetics</b>	
• nice/pleasant	• peaceful/quiet
• pretty	• openness
• clean banks	• out in the country
• shaded	• no crowds
<b>Clean/Safe</b>	
• clean area	• no snakes
• fenced area	
<b>Convenient</b>	
<b>Friendly People</b>	
• friendly/helpful owners	• no drunks/rude people
<b>Fun/Family/Kids</b>	
• good for kids and family	• fun/enjoyable
<b>Amenities</b>	
• no license required	• handicap access
• equipment available	• bathrooms
• baitshop	• clean fish for you
• dock	• no boat needed
• fish for sale	

Refreshments, bait, tackle, restrooms, and fish cleaning facilities can also be available in this area. In addition, some operations have holding vats where live fish are kept for walk-in customers that do not want to fish, but would like to purchase fish, and for those customers that do not catch enough fish. Non-biting catfish, which can account for up to 40% of the catfish in a pond, can be removed by seining, retained in holding vats and sold.

In fish-out operations, concessions can comprise a major portion of income. Worms and other bait should be available for sale and inexpensive spincasting tackle and cane poles can also be made available for sale or rent. In assessing an entry fee, generally prices are set on a per-pound basis somewhere between the wholesale cost paid by the operator and the retail cost of the fish. In some cases, processing services may be offered to those clientele who do not wish to clean their own catch.

Advertising fee-fishing opportunities seems to be most successful by word of mouth and by roadside signs which can be the least expensive form of advertising. Long-term and daily lease operations may required

**Table 2. Suggestions made by fee-fishermen for improving fee fishing operations.**

<b>Fish/Ponds</b>	
• stock other fish	• more fish
• bigger fish	• bigger ponds
• more ponds	• docks/piers
• remove bream	
<b>Seating/Tables</b>	
• more seating	• more tables
<b>More Shade/Trees</b>	
• more shade trees	• landscaping
<b>Amenities (Sales)</b>	
• sell food/drinks	• rod holders
• lend equipment	• sell beer
• boats	• sell bait/better bait
<b>Lower Prices</b>	
• lower prices	• lower bait prices
<b>Clean Up</b>	
• clean up	• remove dead fish
• more garbage cans	• control ants
<b>Fishing</b>	
• night lights/fishing	• teach people to fish
• catch and release	
<b>Other</b>	
• play area for kids	• more advertisement
• more convenient restrooms	• cooking/cleaning area

advertisements in local and regional newspapers, outdoor magazines, and sporting goods stores.

Channel catfish appear to be the most popular stocked fish in fee fishing operations. Other species of interest are bass and bream (sunfish). Channel catfish are an excellent choice for fish-out operations since they are legal to sell by the number or pounds caught. It is illegal to sell bass or panfish by the number or by the pound in South Carolina. These species are best suited for long-term lease operations or daily lease operations where fish are not sold by the number or by the pounds caught.