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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FARM FISH PONDS GROWING IN IMPORTANCE

Farm fish ponds provide increased opportunity for recreational fishing, the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior reports. Thousands of farm fish ponds are being established throughout the various states, but they barely keep ahead of the demands made upon our fishing resources by the increased activity of sport fishermen.

Conservative estimates are that fishing attracts more than 20 million individuals -- or more than any other single sport. Besides the $28,000,000 a year spent for fishing licenses, the sport is a billion dollar a year business in the way of fishing equipment and related expenses.

In spite of the importance of hook and line fishing, the amount of available waters suitable for fishing has gradually decreased. The pressure of civilization has progressively destroyed habitat -- due to silt in the water resulting from deforestation and unwise farm practices, and to such factors as industrial pollution of waters. With the gradual introduction of artificial impoundments to provide adequate water for cattle -- and for other purposes -- new habitat was created for fish. Now farm fish ponds have become of great importance from the point of view of anglers.

In the last few years farmers in Texas have built 200,000 farm fish ponds. Missouri ponds have increased by 50,000 in ten years, and Mississippi reports 22,000 fish ponds in the last five years. Oklahoma is another state where ponds are now gaining in popularity, and the FWS reports 7,000 to 8,000 new ponds a year in that state.

Southern states have led in the introduction of farm fish ponds, and Western states have trailed. But a great deal of new interest in ponds is developing in the West as water tables fall and artificial impoundments are looked to with greater frequency for water supplies.

Western interest has, in fact, increased to the point where the FWS was recently asked to fly in 100,000 bass fingerlings for stocking purposes. The Service supplies fish stock -- especially bluegill, sunfish and large-mouth black bass, but sometimes crappies, bullheads and catfish -- for farm fish ponds.

In many Western states, where sunfish angling is not too popular, northern pike have had to be introduced to keep down the sunfish. Flycasting for sunfish is becoming increasingly popular, however, and large sunfish -- of $\frac{1}{2}$ pound and up in weight -- are becoming recognized by Westerners and northerners as good pan fish.

In some northern waters where the water is cool enough and the conditions suitable -- as in New England -- the ponds can be stocked with trout.

Farm fish ponds can be of almost any size for stocking purposes -- from one acre to over five acres. Ponds as small as $\frac{1}{4}$ acre can produce fish if carefully

managed and treated with commercial fertilizers to keep up the level of plant and small animal life that the fish use for food. Ponds that small, however, do not stay in natural balance as well as the largerponds.

Ponds are stocked up by the FWS with species of fish that will maintain a natural balance between prey and predator species. Bluegills, which utilize the insect and small animal life of ponds, are the prey species, and large-mouth black bass are the predator species.

If the proper balance in weight and number of these two species are maintained, maximum production of fish may be expected. In fact, this means that the ponds must be heavily fished by anglers to prevent overpopulation and stunted growth of fish.

"Fish farmers" can expect returns of 50 to 100 pounds of fish per acre in a natural pond, and up to 300 pounds in a well managed, fertilized pond. This is a greater production of food per acre than could be realized from beef on adjacent land -- which could come to about 150 pounds per acre. The production of a pound of fish in a fertilized pond might cost 6 to 8 cents, but in terms of food and recreation, this is considered small.

Not every farm pond can be a fish pond, however. Ponds must be planned or built specifically for fish. They cannot be on dammed streams where flood waters might wash away the fish stock or where there is too great a flow of water for the small plant and animal life to flourish. Silt from erosion can make a pond uninhabitable for fish, also. Ponds may be as shallow as 3 feet in the South, but must be from six to 15 feet deep in the north to prevent winter killing of fish.

Prospective "fish farmers" should seek help from their conservation agencies for help in planning fish ponds, and the FWS will provide the fish stock when the pond is constructed.

Many states maintain staffs of experts to aid farmers interested in fish ponds, and others, like Ohio, require a permit to build a pond -- but after the permit is given the state lends assistance in surveying the land and constructing the pond.

Over six and one-half million fish from FWS hatcheries were stocked in 8,195 farm ponds in 1948. The government places no restrictions on fishing the farm ponds it stocks, but the farmer must follow state laws as regards licensing and the opening of his land to the public.

Circulars and booklets on fish ponds can be obtained from any of the agencies concerned with farm ponds, or they may be purchased by interested individuals from the Government Printing Office.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also recommends the use of ponds -- especially small ponds -- for bait-minnow production. There is a tremendous demand for bait-minnows by anglers, and minnow production can prove profitable. The FWS does not provide minnow stock for this purpose, however. Minnows can be obtained from dealers -- a list of which the FWS maintains -- or may be seined from lakes or streams, upon the advice of state conservation authorities.

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