

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 1

Submission Date: 02/12/2024

Title of Proposed Change: Create unlimited daily and possession limits for illegally introduced warmwater fish species at Becker Lake.

Proposed Regulation Change: Catch-and-release only for trout. Trout must be immediately released unharmed; no trout may be kept; artificial fly and lure only; single-pointed barbless hooks only. Unlimited smallmouth and largemouth bass; unlimited channel and flathead catfish. General statewide regulations apply to all other fish species.

Current Regulation Language: Catch-and-release only for trout. Trout must be immediately released unharmed; no trout may be kept; artificial fly and lure only; single-pointed barbless hooks only. General statewide regulations apply to all other fish species.

Justification: Becker Lake is 107 surface acres with a maximum depth of 21 feet and an average depth of 10 feet. Becker Lake was originally created in 1880, but at a later date, the current dam was constructed to increase the size of the lake to its current dimensions. The lake was purchased from private ownership in 1973 and turned into a public fishery, and is currently managed as part of the Becker Wildlife Area. Diverted water from Little Colorado River (LCR) flows through an open ditch for 1.7 miles into the southeast side of the lake.

The Department owns the property and water rights associated with Becker Lake. The lake is filled annually from September 15 through April 15 to replace losses due to evaporation, seepage, and occasional irrigation use. During the fill season, water is diverted into the lake until it fills, or April 15, whichever comes first. The diversion is shut as the lake level approaches the spillway to prevent spillage. Unlike many other lakes in Region I, the water level of Becker Lake remains fairly constant through the year since the Department owns all water rights in the lake. There are no other water users taking water from this diversion ditch and there is no natural drainage or other water (e.g., perennial streams) coming into Becker Lake.

Becker Lake is currently managed as a Blue Ribbon year-round Rainbow Trout and Featured Species Tiger Trout fishery. To attempt to meet Blue Ribbon and Featured Species objectives outlined in the Department's Coldwater Vision Document, the lake is currently managed with artificial lure and fly only, single point barbless hooks, and catch-and-release only regulations.

The fish community of Becker Lake is surveyed each spring to monitor growth and condition of stocked sub-catchable and catchable Rainbow Trout and Tiger Trout. Adjustments to the stocking rate are made annually based on the condition of trout caught in annual surveys. The Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) has developed strategic management approaches to guide coldwater species management under the Coldwater Sport Fisheries Strategic Vision Document. The proposed management objectives for Rainbow Trout for Becker Lake is a Blue Ribbon Rainbow Trout fishery with $\geq 5\%$ of Rainbow Trout surveyed being larger than 20 inches, catch rate of 5 fish/hour gill netting ≥ 12 inches, and an angler catch rate of 1.0 fish per hour for anglers targeting Rainbow Trout (AGFD 2019). Management objectives for Tiger Trout under the Featured Species approach for Becker Lake multiple size classes sampled during surveys and an angler catch rate of 1.0 fish per hour for anglers targeting Tiger Trout (AGFD 2019). Currently, as of the last performed survey in 2023 Becker Lake is near meeting or meeting all metrics for a Blue Ribbon Rainbow Trout and Featured Species Tiger Trout fishery as defined by the Department's Coldwater Vision document.

One aspect of the fishery that past and present managers of the lake agree is likely impeding this population from exceeding all management goals to some degree is the presence of illegally introduced warmwater sportfish. Green Sunfish were first illegally introduced in 1989 following the renovation of Becker Lake by the Department to remove the parasitic copepod Lernaean. Largemouth Bass and Channel Catfish were first documented in the early 2000's, though each species was likely introduced many years prior due to the fact that the first individuals to be captured during surveys were adults. The actual mechanisms by which these fish impact the trout fishery at Becker are two fold: through competition with stock trout for potentially limited food resources (particularly young-of-year and age-1 Largemouth Bass and all ages of Green Sunfish) and direct predation upon stocked trout (particularly adult Largemouth Bass and Channel Catfish). Historically, all three of these species occurred at low levels, catch per unit effort (fish per hour) during targeted boat electrofishing surveys to remove these fish tended to be low, and as a result managers viewed their potential impact to the fishery as low. However, the recent climate pattern of earlier springs and high air temperatures resulting in higher than average water temperatures may be changing this. Largemouth Bass in particular appear to be greatly benefiting by these new conditions, in Summer 2023 anglers fishing Becker Lake began reporting catching large numbers of young of year Largemouth Bass. From conversations with past managers and anglers who have fished the lake for a long time this was the first time since the species was illegally introduced that large numbers of Largemouth Bass were caught by anglers. Previously, the catch of Largemouth Bass tended to be a very rare event as evidenced by the fact that no Largemouth Bass were reported as caught during a creel survey of the lake from July 2021 to May 2022. Department staff plan to undertake additional removal efforts using boat electrofishing to prevent this year class of Largemouth Bass from successfully recruiting to the

population and reproducing in the future; however management staff would also like to allow the public to participate in this removal effort to a greater degree. Many anglers are currently removing Largemouth Bass when caught, but have indicated to Department staff that the current six fish statewide limit in place at Becker is too constraining and does not allow them to fully participate in removal efforts like they would prefer. As a result, it is our recommendation that statewide limits for bass and catfish be removed and that the daily and possession limits for each species at Becker lake be changed to unlimited.

Potential Benefits:

- Would allow the angling public to participate in the removal efforts at Becker Lake without the potential for legal issues related to overlimits of Largemouth Bass or Channel Catfish. The average member of the angling public that fishes Becker Lake has been supportive of the Department's removal efforts and many have asked how they can participate themselves.
- Would allow members of the public to bring home large amounts of Largemouth Bass or Channel Catfish home for meals.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Could cause legal issues related to the wanton waste of game meat if members of the public do not recognize that they are still required to remove harvested fish from the lake.
- Negative public perception from the non-angling community if dead fish are not removed from the Becker Lake Wildlife Area.
- Even though the Department has been very public about our desire to remove all warmwater fish from Becker Lake, some segments of the public may view this as a reinforcement of belief that the Department is biased toward trout.

Signage Needs: Two signs will be needed for this water to replace existing signage.

Outreach Needs: Outreach for this potential change will largely take place on social media, over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers.

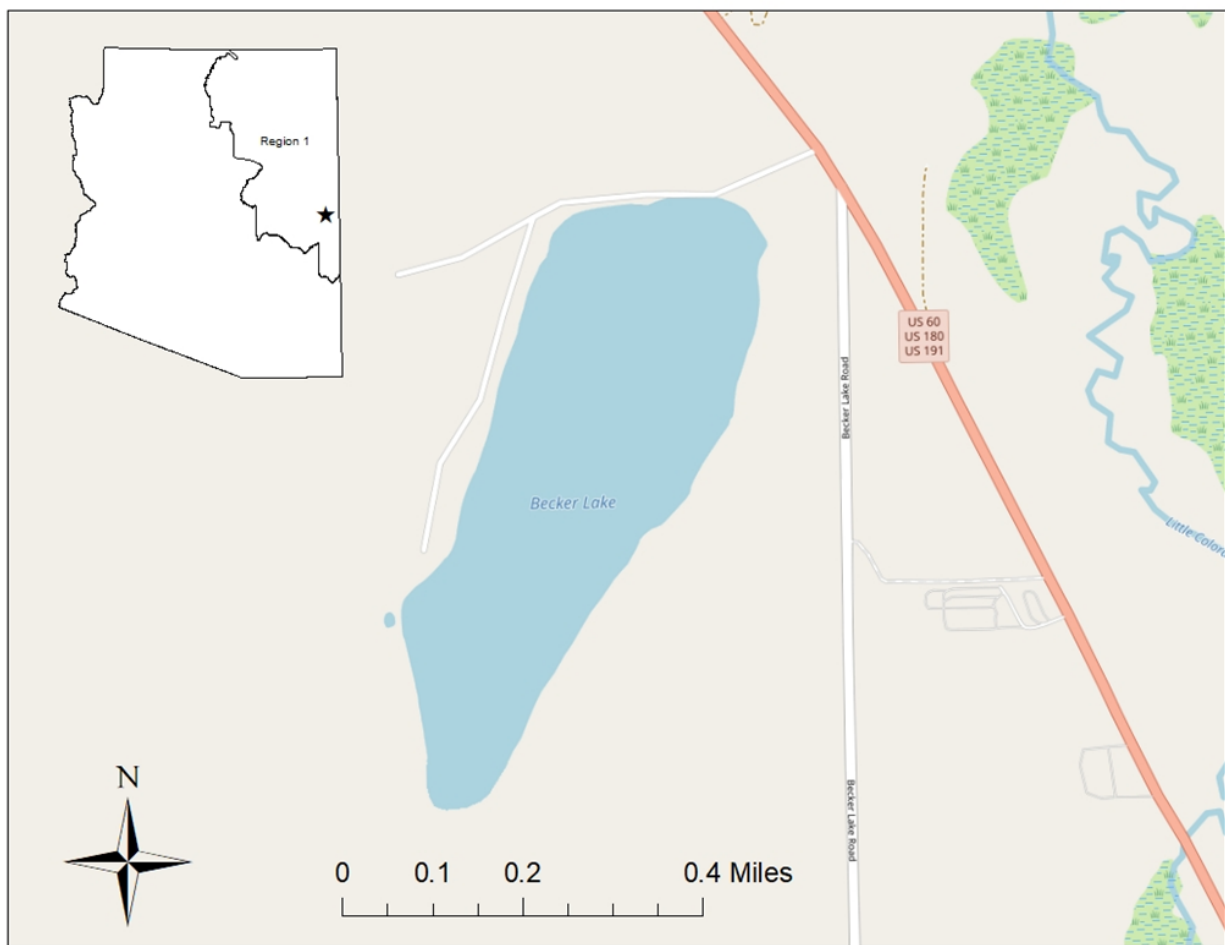


Figure 1. Map of the location of Becker Lake in Arizona.

Literature Cited

Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD). 2019. Coldwater Sportfisheries Strategic Vision Document, 2019-2029. Arizona Game and Fish Department, Statewide Fisheries Program.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 1

Submission Date: 01/17/2024

Title of Proposed Change: Close KP Creek (Greenlee County) to angling to protect a newly transplanted Gila Trout population.

Proposed Regulation Change: Close KP Creek (Greenlee County) to angling.

Current Regulation Language: Statewide daily bag limits apply.

Justification: KP Creek is a tributary to the middle Blue River located in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Greenlee County, Arizona (Figure 1). The headwaters of KP Creek start near Highway 191 at KP Cienega at around 9,000 ft and flows east/southeast for approximately 20 km (12.4 mi) until its confluence with the Blue River at around 5,000 ft. The majority of KP Creek is on Forest Service lands but runs through a piece of private property near the Blue River. There is a waterfall 4.8 km (3.0 mi) upstream from the Blue River that is considered a natural fish barrier.

KP Creek was treated with Rotenone in 1969 to remove Rainbow Trout and later restocked with Apache Trout which at the time, were thought to be native to the Blue River Drainage. Later surveys found hybridized Rainbow Trout x Apache Trout indicating that the treatment was not successful. Following the discovery of additional evidence from museum specimens, it has since been shown that the Blue River watershed was historically home to Gila Trout and not Apache Trout and KP Creek is now a Gila Trout recovery stream.

In 2011, a large portion of the KP Creek watershed was impacted during the Wallow Fire, with 8% high severity burn, 32% moderate severity burn, 49% low severity burn, and only 12% of the watershed remaining unburned. KP creek was surveyed in the fall of 2011 following the Wallow Fire and was found to be highly impacted by post fire effects including ash flows, flooding, and habitat alteration. During this survey only two Rainbow Trout x Apache Trout hybrids were

found in the upper reaches of the South Fork of KP Creek, suggesting a fairly severe fish kill due to the effects of the Wallow Fire.

In 2013, only 1 more fish was detected, and since then 5 passes have been completed in the South Fork of KP and no other fish were ever found. In 2020, an eDNA survey of the entire length of KP Creek and tributaries was completed and no non-native trout were detected. Following these surveys, KP Creek was determined to be fishless above the falls. In the fall of 2021, 109 Gila Trout (Iron Creek lineage) were stocked into KP Creek. All Gila Trout were stocked into the portion of KP Creek immediately downstream of its confluence with the North Fork KP Creek. In 2023, two separate stockings of Gila Trout occurred, on May 9th, Department and Trout Unlimited staff along with volunteers successfully stocked 441 age-1 and 542 age-2 Gila Trout (Iron Creek lineage) in KP Creek and on October 27th Department and United States Fish and Wildlife Service staff and volunteers stocked 1,400 age-0 Gila Trout (Iron Creek lineage). The Department plans future stockings to further aid in the creation and enhancement of a robust Gila Trout population in KP Creek.

The Department deems this a very sensitive stream for Gila Trout recovery and believes it is necessary to close KP Creek to angling to protect this new population. Once the population is established and begins to meet metrics to open the fishery to angling, Department staff will proceed with the regulation change during the following Commission Order 40 cycle.

Potential Benefits: This regulation would protect a new, important Gila Trout population.

Potential Drawbacks: Temporary loss of angling opportunity. This is not a significant loss as KP Creek was fishless from 2013 to 2021 following the Wallow Fire and receives no angler use at this time.

Signage Needs: Two signs will be needed for this water, both will be placed close to the upstream access point.

Outreach Needs: Outreach for this potential change will largely take place on social media, over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers.

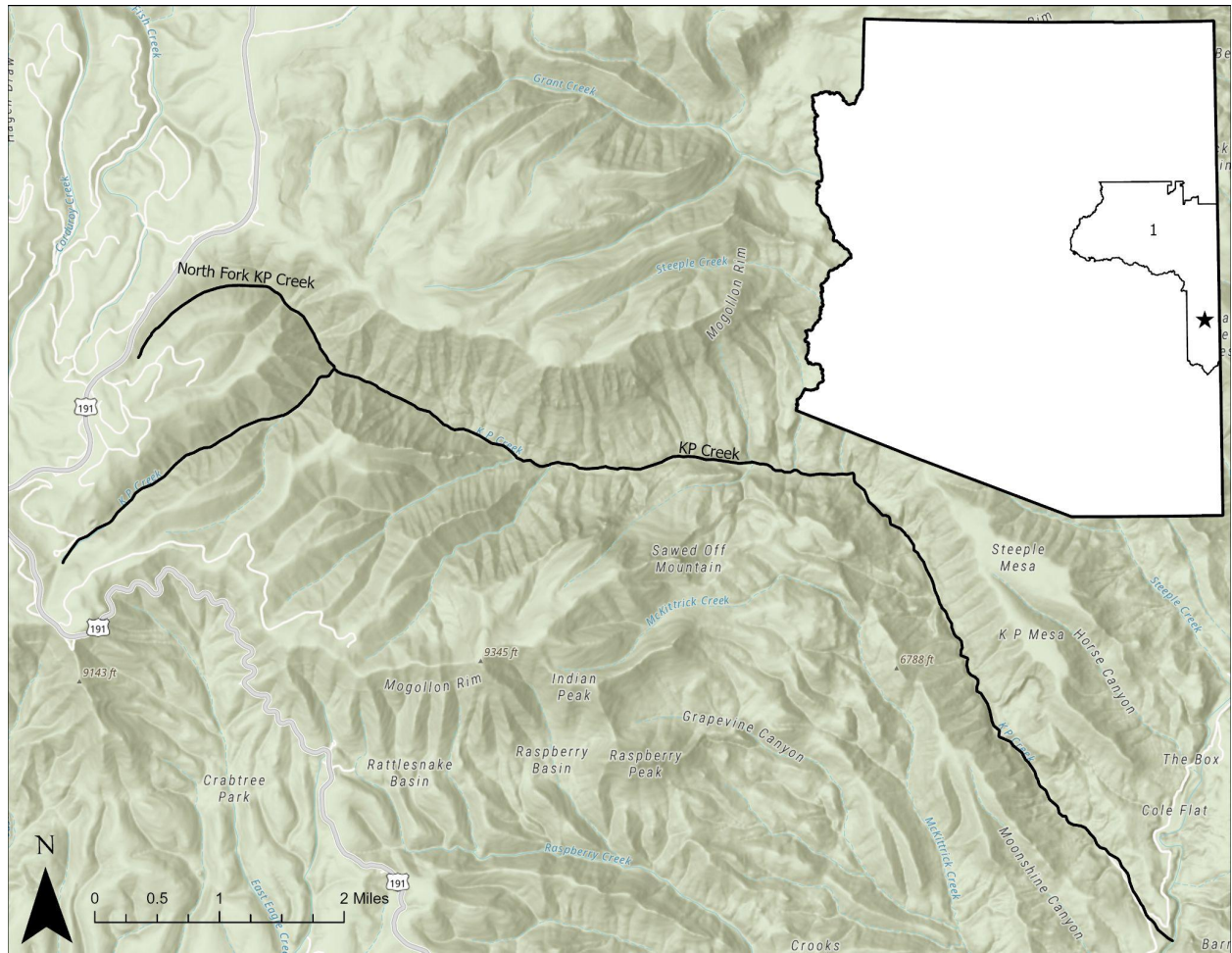


Figure 1. Map of the location of KP Creek in Arizona.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 1

Submission Date: 01/17/2024

Title of Proposed Change: Open Bear Wallow Creek to angling including a seasonal angling closure.

Proposed Regulation Change: Bear Wallow Creek (including connected tributaries) in Apache County would be closed to fishing from January 1 to April 30. It would be open to fishing by catch-and-release only for trout; trout must be immediately released unharmed; no trout may be kept; artificial fly and lure only; single-pointed barbless hooks only from May 1 to December 31.

Current Regulation Language: Bear Wallow Creek is closed to angling.

Justification: Bear Wallow Creek is a tributary of the Black River located on San Carlos Apache Reservation (SCAR) and Apache Sitgreaves National Forest (ASNF; Figure 1). Bear Wallow Creek extends from its confluence with the Black River upstream approximately 9.5 km (5.9 mi) to the intersection of North Fork and South Fork Bear Wallow Creek. North Fork and South Fork Bear Wallow Creek flow approximately 8.3 km (5.2 mi) and 6.1 km (3.8 mi), respectively. Bear Wallow Creek is designated an Apache Trout recovery stream under the Apache Trout Recovery Plan.

The management history of Bear Wallow Creek as an Apache Trout stream has been long, difficult, and complicated from the inception of the project, but has recently been deemed successful and is summarized in the following paragraph. In 1979, a rock masonry and gabion barrier was constructed on lower Bear Wallow Creek upstream of the SCAR to prevent upstream movement of nonnative trout. The stream was first chemically treated with Antimycin in 1981 to remove all fish present and restocked with Apache Trout in 1981 and 1983; however, barrier and chemical treatment failures resulted in a retreatment of the stream in 2003 and 2005. Apache Trout (Soldier Springs lineage) were collected from upper Coleman Creek (n=155) and Soldier Creek (n=147) and stocked into Bear Wallow Creek in 2005. However, high flows and log damage compromised the upper barrier in 2008 allowing Rainbow Trout to breach the barrier

and hybridize with Apache Trout. Surveys in 2009 and 2010 detected that nonnative trout were also breaching the lower barrier which was constructed in 2007 on the SCAR. At that time, all fish in Bear Wallow Creek were thought to be either Rainbow x Apache Trout hybrids or non-native trout after the barrier failure. As a result, additional actions were needed to secure Bear Wallow Creek from future invasions. A modification of the lower Bear Wallow Creek barrier located on the SCAR was completed in 2018. In 2020, the Department initiated the piscicide treatment planning and approval process to prepare to remove presumed Apache X Rainbow Trout hybrids. During this work Department Staff observed fish that appeared to be genetically pure Apache Trout. In August 2020, a total of 59 genetic samples were collected from Bear Wallow Creek and its two tributaries North Fork Bear Wallow Creek and South Fork Bear Wallow Creek for genetic analysis. In November 2020, genetic analyses found that all genetic samples belonged to genetically pure Apache Trout. To confirm this initial result, in April 2021 Department, USFWS, and USFS staff successfully collected an additional 74 genetic samples from Apache Trout in Bear Wallow Creek. These samples also confirmed that sampled trout were genetically pure Apache Trout. It appears that the Wallow Fire and subsequent post fire flooding actually removed hybridized and non-native trout from the drainage, while the small, existing population of pure Apache Trout in the headwaters of North Fork Bear Wallow Creek survived. The barrier modification on the SCAR was completed in time to prevent the re-invasion of non-native trout, while the small remaining population of Apache Trout repopulated a large segment of Bear Wallow Creek. Following the discovery, it was determined that a piscicide treatment of Bear Wallow Creek was no longer needed.

The determination that Bear Wallow Creek contained a genetically pure Apache Trout population prompted a need for a population survey, which Department staff completed in June 2023. During this survey, 333 Apache Trout were captured across 36 sites, varying in length from 82 to 327 mm. The total population was estimated to be 8,161 Apache Trout (7,446, 8,875; 80% confidence interval), and the adult population was estimated at 1,542 (1,006, 2,079). Bear Wallow Creek is the second largest population of Apache Trout in Arizona. The data collected from the Bear Wallow Creek in 2023 demonstrated 3 years of natural recruitment, distribution of Apache Trout throughout roughly half the length of river above the constructed fish barrier, and an adult population size above 500 individuals.

The Department has received criticism in recent years from the general public that native trout streams are closed to angling and never reopened. For the most part this is a fair criticism, as the criteria the Department has used for determining when to reopen native trout recovery streams to angling has proven difficult to meet. Those criteria are (1) distribution of trout throughout the treated and previously occupied reaches, (2) a minimum of three years of recruitment in the

recovery stream, and (3) a population size of at least 500 adults or at the maximum potential for the stream. Currently, Bear Wallow Creek meets two of the three criteria (≥ 500 adults and three years of recruitment). Department staff believe that, in some cases, it is prudent to reopen native trout recovery streams to angling prior to meeting the criteria previously used in order to change public opinion, garner support for upcoming native trout recovery projects, and provide more recreational angling opportunities for native trout, particularly in the case of Bear Wallow Creek due to the sheer size of the population.

A seasonal closure of the stream to angling during Apache Trout spawning would be beneficial to the population and be viewed positively by most anglers. Closing the stream to angling from January 1 to April 30 is expected to have a positive effect on Apache Trout as it would give the population more protection from incidental mortality related to catch-and-release angling, especially during spawning season when trout are most vulnerable. This would provide protection for Apache Trout during the spawning period as the climate warms, and we have shorter and dryer winters. This regulation is consistent with the regulations already in place on other Apache and Gila Trout recovery streams statewide. We believe this can be done effectively, providing additional angling opportunities for native trout, while not compromising the establishment of these recovery populations. We do not expect angler objections to the seasonal closure as the stream is currently closed to angling year round.

Potential Benefits:

- Increase the number of angling opportunities for Apache Trout in Arizona.
- Limit the angling pressure on any single Apache Trout recovery stream by opening multiple recovery streams to angling and spreading out the angling effort
- Help generate public support for future Apache Trout restoration projects by showing the public we are willing to open Apache Trout recovery streams to angling
- Adds another location to catch wild Apache Trout in Arizona for the Arizona and Western Native Trout Initiative Trout Challenges.

Potential Drawbacks:

- The potential for increased incidental mortality related to catch-and-release angling may slow the establishment of a self-sustaining Apache Trout population.

Signage Needs: As with other native trout waters recently opened to fishing or changed to new native trout regulations, the Department will work with Trout Unlimited to develop signage for this location to be able to match designs to create continuity on all native trout waters. If we are unable to get these signs created prior to January 1st, the Department plans to develop simpler signs that will later be replaced by these trout unlimited signs to make certain that the public has

adequate notice of the change in regulations. Ten signs may be needed for this water, one at each major access point.

Outreach Needs: Outreach for this potential change will largely take place on social media, over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers. In addition, this change will be displayed on the Department's Trout Challenge interactive map and the Western Native Trout Initiative's Western Native Trout Challenge website.

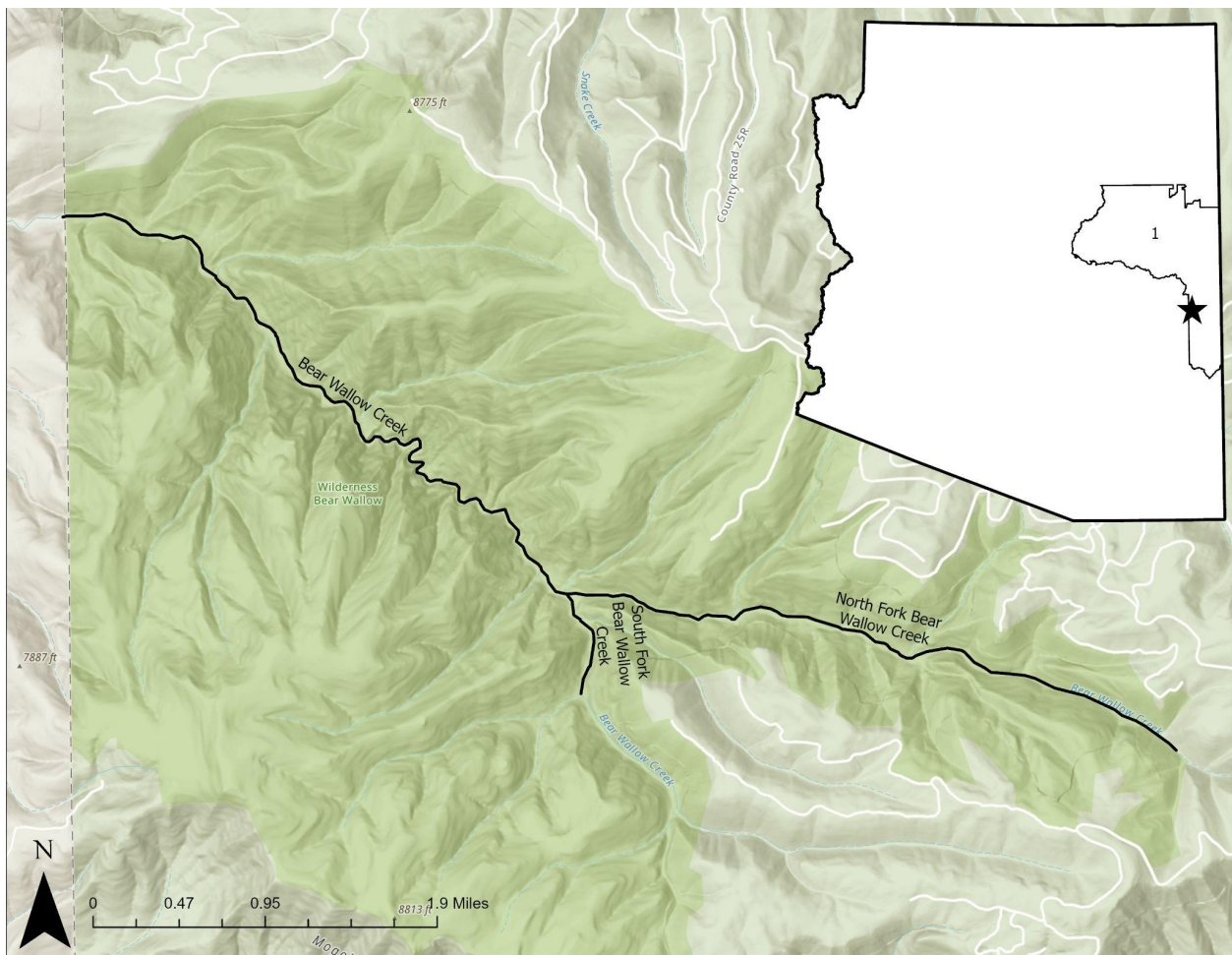


Figure 1. Map of the location of Bear Wallow Creek in Apache County, Arizona.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 1

Submission Date: 03/21/2024

1. Title of Proposed Change: Open Hayground Creek to angling including a seasonal angling closure.

Proposed Regulation Change: Hayground Creek is closed to fishing from Jan. 1 to April 30. Catch-and-release only for trout; trout must be immediately released unharmed; no trout may be kept; artificial fly and lure only; single-pointed barbless hooks only from May 1 to Dec. 31.

Current Regulation Language: Hayground Creek is closed to angling.

Justification: Hayground Creek located in southern Apache County on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest (ASNFs), also known as Hay Creek, is a perennial tributary of the West Fork Black River (WFBR; Figure 1). It originates near the Fort Apache Indian Reservation boundary in southern Apache County and flows southeast to its confluence with the WFBR. The stream runs through a mixture of open grassland and spruce-fir forest. The current fish assemblage of Hayground Creek consists of Brown Trout, Speckled Dace, and Desert Sucker, though recent surveys indicate all fish are present at low densities.

Hayground Creek was designated as a candidate stream for Apache Trout reintroduction by the Apache Trout Recovery Team in the 1980s. To accomplish this, a fish barrier was constructed on Hayground Creek by the ASNFs in 1985 near its confluence with the WFBR. The stream was chemically treated to remove all fish present and Apache Trout (East Fork White River lineage), along with Speckled Dace were reintroduced to recreate the historical native assemblage. In addition to these actions, culverts and a hardened stream crossing were developed in 1990 along with the closure of roads used for a previous timber sale. One half mile of fencing was constructed in 1994 to exclude livestock and elk grazing. Despite these actions, the barrier on Hayground Creek failed in 2000 and several subsequent improvement efforts failed to make this barrier effective. Barrier improvement efforts were abandoned following the construction of a

large, effective barrier on mainstem WFBR just above its confluence with the East Fork Black River in 2015.

After the completion of the lower WFBR barrier, the Department, ASNFs, and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began working on a project to reconnect the West Fork Black River to its tributaries, Hayground, Home, and Stinky Creeks. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish a meta-population for Apache Trout and provide habitat for other native fish species, such as Loach Minnow, Roundtail Chub, Speckled Dace, and Desert Sucker. Establishing Apache Trout in a complex habitat that allows for movement between the WFBR and its tributaries will provide resiliency for the species in the face of increasing threats like drought and catastrophic wildfire. This would also be a rare accomplishment for this species as they are mostly restricted to small headwater streams upstream of artificial or natural fish barriers. Funding for the project was secured from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law National Fish Passage Program through the USFWS. Implementation of this project is slated to begin in the fall of 2024 with one barrier being removed per year until all four removals are complete in the fall of 2027.

Given the shift in the Department's goal to reconnect the entirety of the lower WFBR watershed by the removal of barriers, the current closure to fishing on Hayground Creek that was put in place to aid in the establishment of the Apache Trout population is no longer needed. Department staff believe that opening the creek to angling is the best management decision for the angling public at this time as it will allow another location for anglers to fish for Brown Trout. The WFBR in this area currently has regulations that include a seasonal closure, catch and release only for trout, and hook and bait restrictions. Therefore, to reduce confusion and potential legal issues for the public looking to fish in this section of the WFBR watershed, Department staff recommend mirroring the current regulations for WFBR. Furthermore, in the event that this stream does become a recovery stream for Apache Trout this regulation is consistent with the regulations already in place on other Apache and Gila Trout recovery streams statewide.

Potential Benefits:

- Increase the number of angling opportunities for Brown Trout in Arizona.
- Adds another location to catch wild Brown Trout in Arizona for the Arizona Trout Challenge.
- Simplifies fishing regulations in the area.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Though the ability to harvest a fish in Hayground Creek does not currently exist because the fishery is closed to angler, some anglers that would like to harvest Brown Trout may be disappointed by the catch and release only regulations. However, staff believe that the fact that regulations are simplified in the area outweigh the negatives of not being able to harvest fish.
- If Apache Trout are reintroduced it is possible that there might be increased incidental mortality related to catch-and-release angling, which could slow the establishment of a self-sustaining Apache Trout population.

Signage Needs: Two signs will be needed for this water, one at the lowest end of the open reach and one closer to the upstream access point.

Outreach Needs: Outreach for this potential change will largely take place on social media, over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers. In addition, this change will be displayed on the Department's Trout Challenge interactive map.

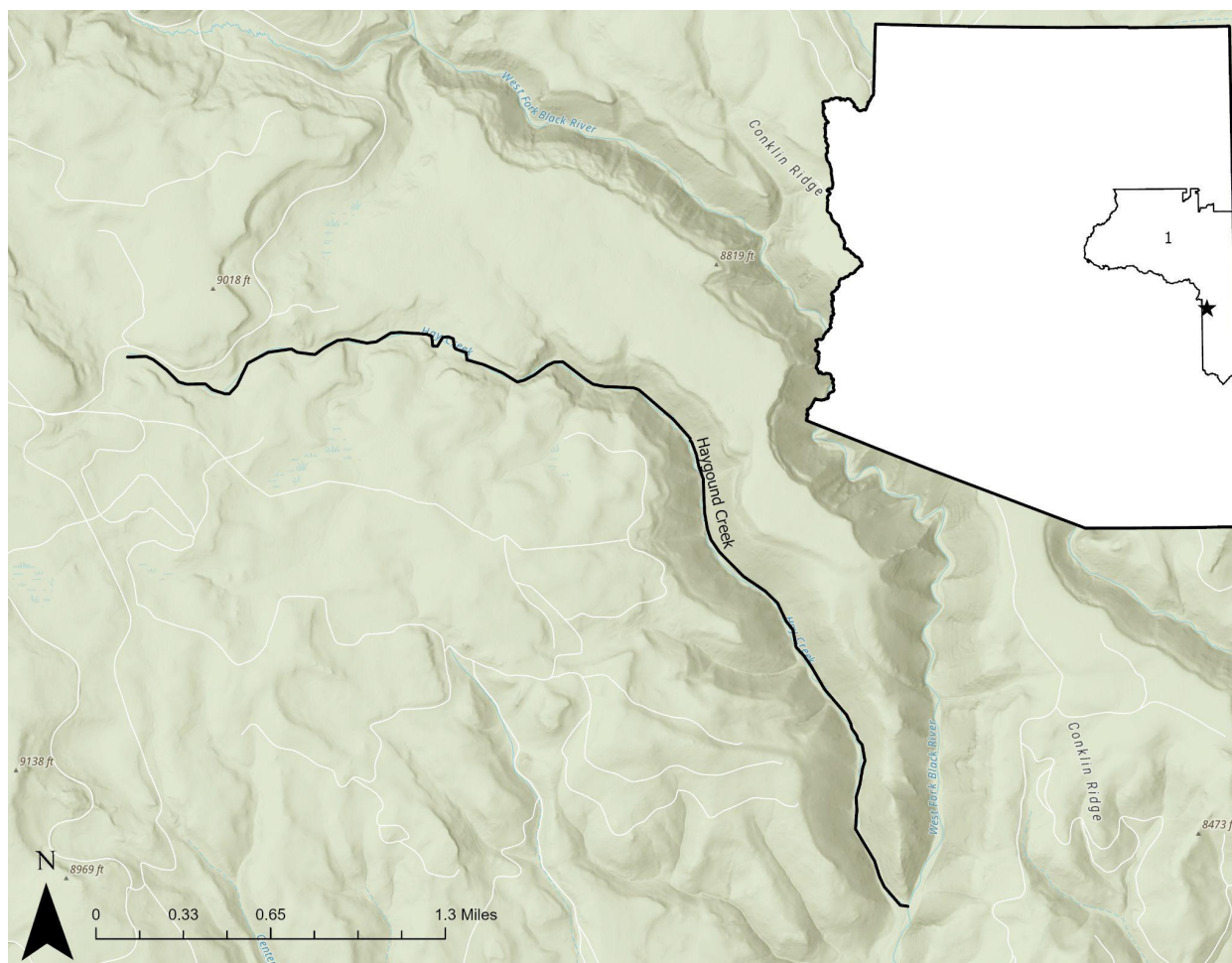


Figure 1. Map of the location of Hayground Creek in Arizona.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 1

Submission Date: 03/21/2024

1. Title of Proposed Change: Open Stinky Creek to angling including a seasonal angling closure.

Proposed Regulation Change: Stinky Creek is closed to fishing from Jan. 1 to April 30. Catch-and-release only for trout; trout must be immediately released unharmed; no trout may be kept; artificial fly and lure only; single-pointed barbless hooks only from May 1 to Dec. 31.

Current Regulation Language: Stinky Creek is closed to angling.

Justification: Stinky Creek located in southern Apache County (Figure 1) on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest (ASNFs), is a perennial tributary of the West Fork of Black River (WFBR). It originates near the Fort Apache Indian Reservation boundary and flows southeast to its confluence with the West Fork. At base flow, Stinky Creek is a small, step-across, first order stream which originates from spring flow in a high alpine meadow then flows alternately through a mixture of open grassland and spruce-fir forest enroute to its confluence with WFBR. The current fish assemblage of Hayground Creek consists of Brown Trout and Speckled Dace, though recent surveys indicate all fish are present at low densities.

Stinky Creek was designated as a candidate stream for Apache Trout reintroduction by the Apache Trout Recovery Team in the 1980s. To accomplish this, a fish barrier was constructed on Stinky Creek by the ASNFs in 1991 near its confluence with the WFBR. The stream was chemically treated to remove all fish present and Apache Trout, along with Speckled Dace were reintroduced to recreate the historical native assemblage. However, during the initial restocking event, large Speckled Dace were found in the stream indicating that there may have been an issue with the barrier. Subsequent surveys over several years captured Brown Trout, indicating that the barrier was ineffective. Efforts to upgrade the barrier were undertaken from 2007 to 2010, but ultimately failed to improve the effectiveness of the barrier. The barrier improvement efforts

were eventually abandoned following the construction of a large, effective barrier on mainstem WFBR just above its confluence with the East Fork Black River in 2015.

After the completion of the lower WFBR barrier, the Department, ASNFs, and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began working on a project to reconnect the West Fork Black River to its tributaries, Hayground, Home, and Stinky Creeks. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish a meta-population for Apache Trout and provide habitat for other native fish species, such as Loach Minnow, Roundtail Chub, Speckled Dace, and Desert Sucker. Establishing Apache Trout in a complex habitat that allows for movement between the WFBR and its tributaries will provide resiliency for the species in the face of increasing threats like drought and catastrophic wildfire. This would also be a rare accomplishment for this species as they are mostly restricted to small headwater streams upstream of artificial or natural fish barriers. Funding for the project was secured from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law National Fish Passage Program through the USFWS. Implementation of this project is slated to begin in the fall of 2024 with one barrier being removed per year until all four removals are complete in the fall of 2027.

Given the shift in the Department's goal to reconnect the entirety of the lower WFBR watershed by the removal of barriers, the current closure to fishing on Stinky Creek that was put in place to aid in the establishment of the Apache Trout population is no longer needed. Department staff believed that opening the creek to angling is the best management decision for the angling public at this time as it will allow another location for anglers to fish for Brown Trout. The WFBR in this area currently has regulations that include a seasonal closure, catch and release only for trout, and hook and bait restrictions. Therefore, to reduce confusion and potential legal issues for the public looking to fish in this section of the WFBR watershed, Department staff recommend mirroring the current regulations for WFBR. Furthermore, in the event that this stream does become a recovery stream for Apache Trout this regulation is consistent with the regulations already in place on other Apache and Gila Trout recovery streams statewide.

Potential Benefits:

- Increase the number of angling opportunities for Brown Trout in Arizona.
- Adds another location to catch wild Brown Trout in Arizona for the Arizona Trout Challenge.
- Simplifies regulations in the area.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Though the ability to harvest a fish in Stinky Creek does not currently exist because the fishery is closed to angler, some anglers that would like to harvest Brown Trout may be disappointed by the catch and release only regulations. However, staff believe that the fact that regulations are simplified in the area outweigh the negatives of not being able to harvest fish.
- If Apache Trout are reintroduced it is possible that there might be increased incidental mortality related to catch-and-release angling which could slow the establishment of a self-sustaining Apache Trout population.

Signage Needs: Two signs will be needed for this water, one at the lowest end of the open reach and one closer to the upstream access point.

Outreach Needs: Outreach for this potential change will largely take place on social media, over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers. In addition, this change will be displayed on the Department's Trout Challenge interactive map.

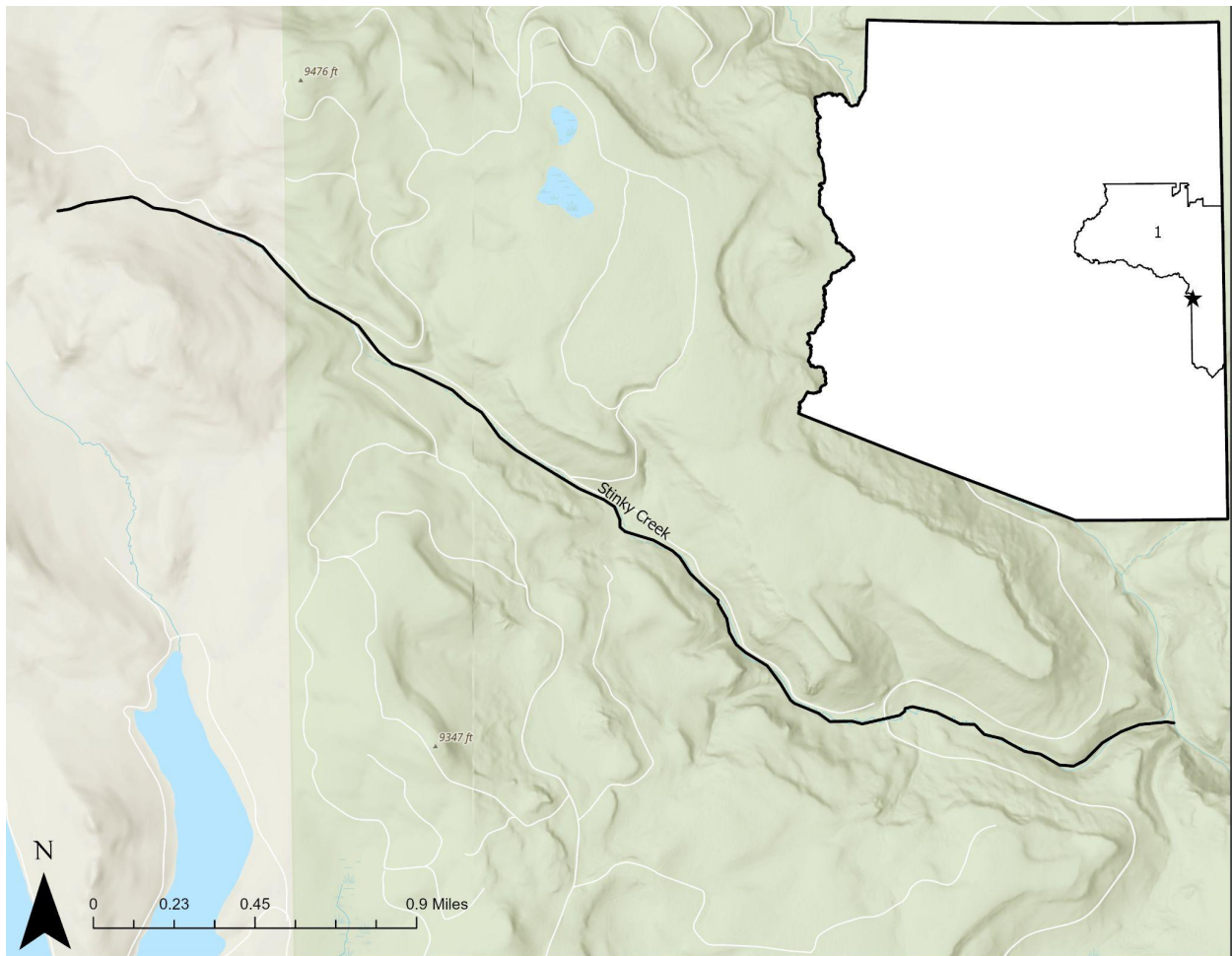


Figure 1. Map of Stinky Creek location in Apache County, Arizona.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT
RECOMMENDATIONS
CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Submitted by: Nathan Berg

Submission Date: April 12, 2024

1. Title of Proposed Change: Catch and Release Only for All Fish Species at Cluff Ranch Pond #3, Excluding Rainbow Trout.

Proposed Regulation Change: Catch and release for all fish species (excluding Rainbow Trout) from January 1, 2025 through May 31, 2026. Thereafter, statewide daily bag and possession limits would apply (except a four catfish in any combination daily bag limit special regulation)

Current Regulation Language: Catch and release only for all fish species (excluding Rainbow Trout) through December 31, 2024.

Justification: Cluff Ranch Pond 3 was drained in January 2021 to replace a dam valve and the entire fish population was lost. That work is now complete and the reservoir is partially full of water. Redear Sunfish, Bluegill and Channel Catfish will be stocked this spring. Largemouth Bass and potentially additional sunfish species will be stocked in the spring of 2025. Rainbow Trout stocking will resume from November 2024 – March 2025.

Potential Benefits: The catch and release regulation will allow the warmwater species to establish a self-sustaining population before being harvested. If not allowed adequate time to establish, the warmwater species may not reproduce and recruit in the pond and additional stockings would be necessary.

Potential Drawbacks: Anglers will not be able to harvest warmwater species until June 1, 2026.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 4 & 6

Submission Date: 04/12/2024

Title of Proposed Change: Expand on-site collection of live baitfish for Tilapia

Proposed Regulation Change: Expand the live baitfish area for Tilapia to include “3) all waters of Maricopa County south of Interstate 10 excluding the Central Arizona Project Canal.”

Current Regulation Language: Tilapia are permitted on all waters of Yuma County. Additional open areas include: 1) waters in La Paz County located west of Highway 95 and south of Interstate 10, and 2) the Colorado River from the Palo Verde Diversion Dam downstream to the Southern International Boundary with Mexico, including impounded reservoirs. No waters of any other counties are open.

Justification: The Gila and Salt rivers have areas where Tilapia are abundant. Tilapia in this area is considered a low risk under the Department’s Culture and Distribution of Non-native Fishes policy (DOM I1.5). Wildlife Managers have seen multiple people cast netting in these areas bringing up multiple Tilapia varying in sizes. This regulation change would allow Tilapia as live baitfish to be collected on site and provide anglers with an additional opportunity to use Tilapia as a baitfish. This is also the only species of live baitfish you cannot collect on site in these areas and the regulation change would reduce the potential for misidentification of live baitfish species in this area. This would simplify the regulation for anglers allowing them to collect onsite live baitfish for all live baitfish species in the Gila and Salt Rivers and reduce the potential for the misidentification of live baitfish by anglers.

Potential Benefits: This regulation change would expand opportunities for live baitfish collected on site for anglers and provide an additional opportunity to use Tilapia as a baitfish. On the Salt and Gila rivers anglers can collect sunfish species, Common Carp, Goldfish, Gizzard Shad, and Threadfin Shad. Tilapia is the only other live baitfish species in this area you cannot collect on site to use as bait.

Potential Drawbacks: Tilapia is a species of concern for establishment in cooler temperature areas. By allowing collection there may be an increased risk of movement of Tilapia although the

area the regulation is focused on is warmer temperatures where the species is already present and located in the surrounding areas.

Signage Need: No signage is needed.

Outreach Needs: Outreach will largely take place over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers. In addition Department staff will provide outreach during the Lake Pleasant creel in January once the regulation goes into effect.

COMMISSION ORDER 40: FISH MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNAL PROPOSALS

CALENDAR YEARS 2025 & 2026

Region: 6

Submission Date: 04/12/2024

Title of Proposed Change: Change in crappie limits

Proposed Regulation Change: Reduce the bag limit to 15 crappie per day at Lake Pleasant, Apache, Canyon, and Saguaro lakes..

Current Regulation Language: Unlimited harvest of crappie is currently allowed at all four lakes.

Justification: The proposed regulation changes would provide simplification and consistency among the crappie lakes near the valley. With the addition of new technologies such as live scope, anglers are able to target crappie due to their signatures on the sonar. Anglers are able to target not only crappie but larger crappie with the use of these new technologies.

Three of the six lakes located in Region 6 are managed under the Department's Warmwater Vision Document for crappie. Of the four lakes in Region 6 listed for the regulations change, one is the top fished lakes in Arizona and the other three are in the top 14 most popular lakes in Arizona. Lake Pleasant is the number one fished lake in the state with an estimated 497,195 angler user days (AUDs) followed by Bartlett Lake (441,032 AUDs), and Roosevelt Lake (440,153 AUDs; Responsive Management 2022). Saguaro Lake is ranked 5th with 206,180 AUDs, Canyon Lake is ranked 8th with 149,771 AUDs and Apache Lake is ranked 14th with 84,695 AUDs (Responsive Management 2022).

The most recent creel survey at Lake Pleasant was in 2016 and indicated crappie comprised 0.5% of the fish caught with a harvest rate of 0.3%. Less than 1% of anglers targeted only crappie; however, the popularity of crappie fishing at Lake Pleasant has increased in the last few years based on angler reports and social media posts. Comparisons between the 2004 and 2016 creel indicated a decrease in crappie annual catch from 12,808 to 306 and an annual harvest decrease from 10,528 to 131 respectively (2016 Lake Pleasant Creel Report). Additionally, crappie creel catch rates are < 0.01 fish/hour (unpublished 2016 Pleasant Creel data).

Over the last six years, excluding 2020, the Department supplementally stocked crappie annually at Bartlett and Roosevelt lakes to help the population sustain the current pressure and harvest. No supplemental stockings have occurred at Lake Pleasant. This year the Department stocked both Bartlett and Roosevelt lakes. However, despite supplemental stocking for five out of six years, the crappie populations are still not recovering enough to sustain the current pressure as seen in trends in angler catch rates and/or harvest at Bartlett Lake and Roosevelt Lake (unpublished Bartlett and Roosevelt creel data).

Although Saguaro, Canyon, and Apache lakes are not known for their crappie populations, they are occasionally caught in these waters. By simplifying the regulations across the region instead of by lake, anglers are less likely to be confused and harvest more than the new recommended bag limit of 15.

Potential Benefits: The proposed regulation change would establish a clear consistent limit in the lakes near the valley to help protect the population from overharvest, especially from anglers who can target them better with newer technologies. Over time the regulation may also reduce the need to stock additional crappie as the populations may be able to become self-sustaining and withstand the current angling pressure. The regulation may also increase catch rates as anglers that do harvest would have only been able to harvest 15 crappie compared to the current unlimited regulation on Lake Pleasant, Saguaro, Canyon, and Apache lakes.

Potential Drawbacks: Crappie is a sought after species that people enjoy eating and anglers may get upset at lower bag limit although our current data on imposing a regulation change to minimum length limit was supported at both Bartlett and Roosevelt lakes to help improve the crappie population.

Signage Need: No signage is needed.

Outreach Needs: Outreach will largely take place over the phone when Department staff are having conversations with anglers, or in person when Department staff encounter anglers. In addition Department staff will provide outreach during the Lake Pleasant creel in January once the regulation goes into effect.