

DEC has proposed changes to the state's Freshwater Fishing Regulations – proposed changes aim to simplify existing regs

Interested parties may submit comments through Feb. 6, 2022

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner has released proposal to clarify and simplify sportfishing regulations based on public feedback and DEC fisheries manager reviews of rules associated with the management of the State's fisheries. The proposed rulemaking (as announced in the New York State Register) also includes a limited number of waterbody-specific regulation changes to support improved management of these waters.

The proposed changes will help to align freshwater fishing regulations with the State's current management objectives in a way that is easy for New Yorkers to understand and reflects their input. This proposal was driven by public comments and expert feedback and represents the Department's continued commitment to making fishing more enjoyable and accessible by eliminating unnecessary and outdated rules.

Highlights of the proposal include:

New rules for trout management in ponded waters, which consolidates 143 waterbody and 33 county-wide special regulations into a new statewide regulation that permits anglers to harvest five fish per day, only two of which can be greater than 12 inches in length. The proposal seeks to better align regulations with intended outcomes. Most inland ponds and lakes stocked with brown trout and rainbow trout are managed for put-and-take or put-grow-and-take fisheries. Waters managed for these species and purpose are proposed to be open all year, while brook trout ponds, which are largely managed for self-sustaining wild populations, will be closed to fishing between Oct. 16 and March 31. This rule will increase the longevity of stocked brook trout that are highly vulnerable to ice fishing.

Removing the statewide closed season restriction on lake trout and Atlantic salmon. Keeping the season open year-round consolidates 24 lake trout and 33 Atlantic salmon waterbody-specific regulations into statewide regulations consistent with current management practices, as over the years a greater number of these waters have been open all year under special regulations. In addition, six outdated lake trout and five unnecessary Atlantic salmon special regulations are proposed to be eliminated.

Allowing ice fishing unless specifically prohibited in New York, except for Essex, Franklin, Fulton, Hamilton, Herkimer, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Warren, and Washington counties, where the existing "ice fishing is prohibited unless specifically permitted in waters inhabited by trout" regulation will still apply. Trout fishing in ponds is currently allowed in most other waters, so allowing it statewide with the nine-county exception will reduce the number of special regulations needed overall.

Providing consistency in opening and closing fishing season dates for sport fish. DEC currently uses a mixed approach for season dates. Some seasons begin on a specific date, while others start on a designated Saturday. Based on results of an angler poll conducted earlier this year, DEC is proposing that all sportfish seasons begin and end on specific dates. Notable changes to statewide opening dates are:

May 1 for walleye, northern pike, pickerel, and tiger muskellunge; June 1 for muskellunge; June 15 for black bass; and

Aligning special regulations with new season dates for these species:

Eliminating the current three-fish-per-day daily walleye limit in Oneida Lake and reverting to the statewide five-fish-per-day limit due to the abundant adult walleye population.

Correcting a previous rule change omission by changing the daily limit for steelhead on the Lower Niagara River from three to two fish per day.

The DEC has released new regulations for the state's Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). They are commonly referred to as PART 51 Regs and are the first new regs to be released in more than 25 years.

The updates include restrictions on the use of motor vehicles and some motorized equipment, prohibition of introduction of invasive species, restriction on discharge of firearms to designated areas, restriction on use of boats to electric or non-powered boats, and a leash law for dogs except in certain situations.

The previous regulations for WMAs had been in place since 1995. Here are some details on the changes:

Restriction of motor vehicles and some motorized equipment

The restrictions on the use of motor vehicles and some motorized equipment, such as chainsaws, in WMAs serves to clean up some gray area that was left unclarified by the 1995 regulations.

Previously "motorized equipment" was not defined. With the definitions in place, enforcement will be easier. Previous definitions were very vague and difficult to limit and enforce.

Snowmobiles will be allowed on designated routes covered by a minimum of three inches of snow or ice and only from the close of the regular big game hunting season until March 31. Even designated routes may only serve as connector trails from one loop system to another, but they [loop trails] cannot be contained on the WMAs.

Prevent the introduction of aquatic invasive species

This regulation is new to the WMA guidelines. It had been covered in broader DEC regulations, but not regulations specifically guiding the use of WMAs. Including it in the WMA updates allows for enforcement of rules protecting the WMAs from invasive species.

Restrict the discharge of firearms other than for hunting or trapping to designated areas

This update has also been made to clarify existing ambiguous language in the regulations. Only paper targets will be allowed in the WMAs.

Restrict the use of boats to electric or non-powered boats

This is a generic clarification for boat use within the WMAs, Farquhar said. Some exceptions apply. For example, if a boater had to access a WMA seeking shelter from imminent stormy weather. Farquhar gave the example of boaters on the open waters of Lake Ontario needed to seek shelter on a WMA. Boats may not be stored or anchored overnight on WMAs. Most WMAs do not permit camping.

Dogs be kept on a leash and under control

Previously dogs had not been addressed in the WMA regulations. DEC had added a requirement that all dogs be kept on a leash and under control, with a few exceptions. Exceptions include when dogs are being legally used for hunting, when dogs are training for hunting on lands designated as dog-training areas during training seasons, or when participating in a DEC-licensed field trial.

The overarching goal of these regulation changes was to clarify language that was previously unspecified, to increase transparency from government regulation to user experience.

The full regulations can be accessed via the DEC website.

Establishing a no-limit, all-year season and 12-inch-minimum length restriction for walleye on Skaneateles Lake to suppress this introduced species, which has the potential to negatively impact the lake's high-quality trout and salmon fishery.

Banning snatching and spearing in select waters.

The full text and a summary of the proposed regulatory changes are available on DEC's website. DEC is interested in anglers' viewpoints and encourages public feedback on these proposals. Comments should be submitted via e-mail to regulations.fish@dec.ny.gov with the subject line "Fishing Regulations Proposal Comments" or via mail to the Inland Fisheries Section, NYSDEC, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-4753. Comments will be accepted through Feb. 6, 2022.

DEC's new rules for Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) will regulate vehicles, boats, firearms and help prevent invasive species introduction

Habitat Management and Access on Wildlife Management Areas

Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) are lands owned by New York State under the control and management of the DEC's Bureau of Wildlife. These lands have been acquired primarily for the purposes of wildlife reproduction and survival. They also provide great opportunities for wildlife-related recreation and areas for the public to interact with a wide variety of wildlife species. Funds from Federal Excise Taxes on sporting equipment collected under the Pittman-Robertson Act are used to purchase and maintain WMAs.

History of WMAs

Since the early 1900s, the WMA program has established permanent access to lands in New York State for the conservation and promotion of its fish and wildlife resources and to secure this land for public use. Money used to acquire lands included in the WMA system has been a combination of state and federal funding. The Conservation Fund (begun in 1925) was the first dependable source followed by two federal programs in the 1930s:

The Federal Resettlement Administration bought marginal and worn-out farmland. Later, these parcels were donated to the state for wildlife management purposes.

The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, more commonly known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, was signed into law in 1937 and is still in effect today. It places an excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. It funds restoration, acquisition, management of habitat for wildlife, and efforts to provide access for wildlife-related recreation.

WMAs also provide areas for research on various wildlife species. A Ruffed Grouse study conducted on Connecticut Hill WMA is considered the standard reference on Ruffed Grouse in the Northeast. Located in Schuyler County and Tompkins County, Connecticut Hill encompasses 11,237 acres, or about 17.55 square miles.

Activities for all Ages and Abilities

These special areas provide suitable habitats for rare, at-risk, and game species alike. WMAs offer a variety of activities, including:

- hunting
- trapping
- bird watching
- wildlife photography
- fishing