

# Legislation gives freshwater fisheries a

BY PHILLIP GENTRY  
FOR THE JOURNAL

If you follow much of the outdoors in South Carolina, you may have heard of a couple of pieces of pending legislation that were introduced last year with the intent of overhauling many of the laws governing our freshwater fisheries.

It's also been referenced in this column several times.

During the waning days of the 2011 SC legislative session, the two bills, H3864 and H3865 — one dealing with gamefish laws, the other dealing with non-gamefish laws — were railroaded during a political chess match and failed to pass before the session expired.

Fortunately, the bills moved rapidly through the process when session returned in January and were ratified on Jan. 26 and signed by the governor on Feb. 1. These laws are set to take effect July 1 of this year.

The passing of this legislation marks the first major rewrite of freshwater fishing regulations in more than 40 years. The rewrite was undertaken to bring creel and size limits for many freshwater fish species up to date while also reorganizing and cleaning up many of the "patch job" regulations that had been added and amended to the freshwater statutes over the years.

So, how do these laws affect fishing from the standpoint of an Oconee County angler who spends his fishing forays on Keowee, Jocassee and the upper reaches of Lake Hartwell?

After throwing in the caveat that these laws have not been put into print yet and may be subject to different wording when the Rules and Regulations manual comes out in mid-June, here's what an Oconee angler can

expect on the local lakes and why.

The daily creel limit for black bass, meaning largemouth, smallmouth, spotted, and redeye (coosae) bass will remain at 10 per angler. The new law establishes a minimum size limit of 12 inches for both largemouth and smallmouth bass, whereas before there was no size limit.

Exceptions to these rules apply on Lake Jocassee.

The minimum size limit on Jocassee for largemouth bass is 14 inches. However, the new regulations permit the taking of 15 spotted bass per day statewide, then later reduce that number on the Savannah chain lakes of Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond plus Keowee, Tugaloo, Yonah, and the Chatoga River to ten. Apparently, taking 15 spotted bass, with no size limit, from Jocassee will be legal.

Speaking of Jocassee, the current daily creel limit of five trout will be reduced to three, and only one of these three may exceed 20 inches in length. The 15-inch minimum size limit that has been in place on Jocassee for several years will remain and apply to the new creel limit but will be suspended from June 1 through Sept. 30 when no minimum size limit will be in place.

This is to support a trophy fishery where tournaments and trophy anglers are looking to catch one big trout. Suspending the size limit during the hotter months will help reduce hooking mortality since even released trout of any size rarely survive in the warmer water.

In addition, there is a whole host of regulations regarding where and when you can catch and keep or catch and release trout in our mountain streams. Space limits what will fit in this column, but the



## much-needed boost

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The freshwater fisheries bills that were passed into law at the beginning of this month mark the first major overhaul of regulations in 40 years. These updates will help preserve and protect our fisheries' resources for future generations.

intent is to establish a catch-and-release fishery so it will be illegal to keep trout from Nov. 1 through May 14 in a number of these mountain streams.

Crappie in all three reservoirs, and anywhere else you find them in South Carolina, will have to be 8 inches to keep, and the daily creel limit

is reduced from 30 to 20 crappie per day.

On Lake Hartwell, the daily creel limit for striped bass/hybrid striped bass remains at 10 per day, but only three of those fish can be more than 26 inches in length.

The new laws also change many of the gamefish and non-gamefish regulations that apply elsewhere across the state and also help redefine where one water body starts and where it ends.

The casual reader may wonder what's so great about a general reduction in the number of fish you can keep and why certain fish now have to be a minimum size before you can keep them.

The answer, in one simple word, is conservation.

For the most part, until this coming July 1, South Carolina anglers have caught and kept freshwater fish based on laws that

were written back during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In those days, the number of anglers was less, the average days-per-angler spent fishing was less and the technology employed by granddad when he went fishing couldn't hold a candle to the high-tech, push-a-button/catch-a-fish equipment that we use today.

What our fisheries managers, law makers, and even yours truly — who was privileged enough to be asked to sit in on some of the brainstorming sessions back when these laws were being written up as recommendations — hope to gain by all this is a future pastime to pass along to our children while we enjoy a little more quality over a little less quantity.

Phillip Gentry can be reached at [pgentry6@bellsouth.net](mailto:pgentry6@bellsouth.net).