

New fishing rules, regulations take

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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If you're an angler in the Upstate, it's pretty much going to be status quo this holiday weekend. Get up early, try to catch a few fish and get off the lake before the holiday crowd arrives, then maybe get back on the water around dark and see if anything is still biting.

However, for Midlands-area anglers — along with anyone else who might be traveling to the Saluda River below Lake Murray to fish for cold-water trout — legislation that was recently passed into law will take effect Sunday.

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources held a series of public meetings in February to discuss the possibility of creating a "catch-and-release zone" to facilitate trout

reproduction that's now occurring in the river. That came after a group of river-usage groups negotiated a deal with SCE&G to maintain year-round cold-water release into the Saluda River below Lake Murray.

Feedback from anglers and other stakeholders was positive, and a bill sponsored by Sen. Katrina Shealy of Lexington was drafted for consideration by the South Carolina General Assembly during the session that recently ended.

"The establishment of the catch-and-release zone between I-20 and Stacy's Ledge on the Lower Saluda will provide an opportunity for anglers to experience a very good trout fishery in a very unique location," SCDNR fisheries chief Ross Self said. "This area should have very good access and is the best area for



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New regulation changes pertaining to cold-water trout in the Saluda River below Lake Murray and redfish in coastal waters statewide take effect this weekend.

anglers to wade and fish at any location along Lower Saluda."

Senate Bill 1044 was passed by the legislature in May and signed into law by Gov. Henry McMaster on May 17.

As a result, effective Sunday, the lower reach of the Saluda River — from the eastbound I-20 bridge downstream to Stacy's Ledge — is year-round

catch-and-release fishing only for all species of cold-water trout. The law also makes it unlawful to take and retain trout at any time in this section of the river.

South Carolina's coastal anglers also need to be aware of some changes to the creel limit for redfish — one of the most popular inshore saltwater species of our state — that also go

effect this weekend

into effect this weekend.

In recent years, state biologists have documented a declining trend in the state's red drum population, which has been underscored by reports from longtime local anglers. These concerns prompted the SCDNR to take a closer look at the species last year, culminating in an assessment that found South Carolina's red drum population was experiencing overfishing.

The General Assembly responded by passing a new law intended to reverse overfishing, which McMaster recently signed. The new catch limit allows two fish per person per day, and no more than six fish per boat per day, effective Sunday. The previous catch limit was three fish per person per day, with no boat limit. The slot limit of 15-23 inches remains unchanged.

"We've been monitoring red drum populations across the state using the same techniques for nearly 30 years, and what we've seen over the last 10-15 years is concerning," said assistant marine scientist Joey Ballenger, who oversees SCDNR's red drum research. "Across the state, we've seen declines in abundance of the juvenile fish most commonly targeted by anglers."

Congratulations to state legislators for helping conserve and increase our state's natural resources, and, anglers, be aware of the changes.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of "Upstate Outdoors" from noon to 2 p.m. Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM and online at 1063word.radio.com. This week's guest co-host will be Kyndel McConchie, the information director for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.