

The anti-fishing virus for South Carolina?

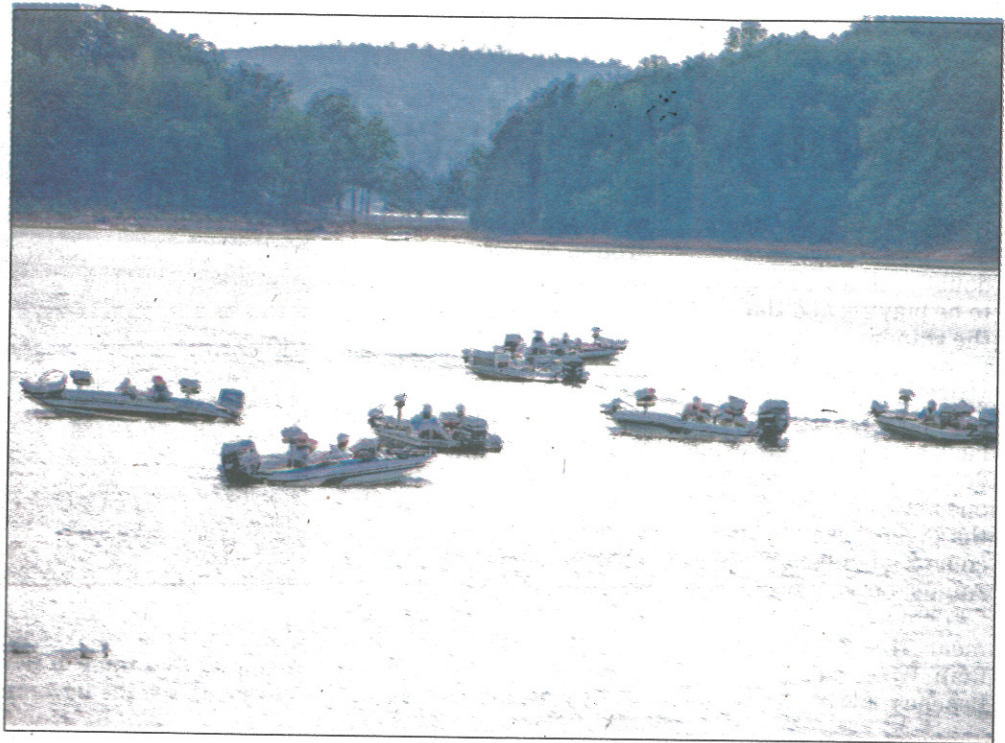
BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

As if the last month hasn't been bad enough with food shortages, school closings and no toilet paper to be had anywhere in the Upstate in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster issued an executive order this week closing all public access to the state's beaches and inland waterways.

Following the order, which left a lot of specific questions unanswered, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources sought to get clarification on the closure order. McMaster briefly mentioned the public waterway access closure in his address to the media on Wednesday when he announced another executive order closing all non-essential businesses, but it did little to clarify things.

Two weeks prior to the closure order, a change in the weather for the better found many cooped-up residents escaping to the state's public beaches and waterways to unwind. Unfortunately, many forgot or simply disregarded the advice from the Centers for Disease Control to maintain social distancing. Sandbars, islands and beaches across the state were overrun.

The following week, after significant warning to residents, SCDNR and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division were asked to observe and in some cases ticket people not adhering to the health standards. The report back to the governor's office of the observations resulted in the executive order.



PHILLIP GENTRY | FOR THE JOURNAL

Anglers looking to practice social distancing on the water received bad news when South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster issued an executive order closing all public access to the state's beaches and waterways.

"As a result of behavior observed this past weekend by the Department of Natural Resources and SLED, it has become necessary to close public access to our state's beaches, and to close boat ramps and landings on our state's lakes, rivers and waterways," McMaster said. "This is unfortunate for those who chose to responsibly follow the instructions of our public health officials, but it is a necessary action to prevent the spread of this dangerous virus."

The majority of those who were following the public health advice were fishermen. As the closure does not discriminate between pleasure boaters and anglers, the divide between the two groups has grown larger. In addition, many anglers have been left with the opinion

that the lakes themselves had been closed and that fishing was off limits to anyone other than property owners that surrounded that particular body of water.

During the time since the order, SCDNR received a response which it has posted on its website under the heading "SCDNR FAQs Regarding COVID-19." The response is so redundant and filled with legalese that many anglers are more confused than informed.

The document does indicate that fishing has not been outlawed. The main focus of the clarification is that public access to waterways is closed but that privately owned access ways — such as neighborhood access, fee-pay or individually owned facilities — may be an option for boaters to launch boats

into the public water.

In addition, SCDNR initially closed all of the state's 16 public fishing lakes that it owns or manages, but it later reopened access to 13 of those lakes for bank fishing only. Fishing piers and boat-launch areas to those lakes remain closed, and the department stressed all anglers fishing on the banks must follow social-distancing protocols and group in numbers of three or less.

Boaters are encouraged to contact an intended location to determine if the facility is open and to what extent before showing up with boat in tow.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of a forthcoming podcast radio program "The Outdoors Show with Phillip Gentry & Boat Girl." More information on the show can be found on its Facebook page.