



April 2, 2009

ATTN: Conservation Officers & Weighmasters  
TIBF affiliated bass clubs & tournament organizations

SUBJECT: Reducing bass delayed mortality through improved weigh-in procedures

If I can accomplish only one goal as the TIBF State Conservation Director, it would be to improve the condition of the bass resource. The following information is being provided to help reduce bass mortality from our bass tournaments. One of the primary ways we can accomplish this is to modify our weigh-in procedures to reduce stress and physical damage to the fish, which will greatly reduce delayed mortality.

While the levels of fish mortality prior to the weigh-in remain generally low, delayed mortality percentages are thought to be much higher than previously estimated. Some studies conducted with tournament-caught fish kept in holding pens rather than released back into the lake suggest that delayed mortality may be as high as 50% (under poor conditions). We don't see this, since these fish may die days or even weeks after the tournament. In addition, they don't always float to the surface. Many burrow into the rocks or brush as they are dying.

Regardless of your feelings towards the validity of these studies, in order to sustain this resource (and our sport) we are obligated to do everything we can to reduce damage to the fish during our tournaments. While there are a host of things to be done to protect your catch while on the water, the focus here is on the weigh-in and release process.

As most of you know, the primary culprits that cause damage to the fish during weigh-in are:

- A lack of breathable oxygen and excessive handling leading to high stress levels. This weakens them physically, reducing their ability to catch prey and sustain themselves. It also weakens their immune system and ability to ward off diseases.
- Physical damage to their all-important slime coat, which protects them from potentially-fatal skin diseases.

Does the following scenario sound familiar?

1. At the end of the tournament, competitors put their bass in bags containing various levels of water from their live-wells. Often, they remain in these bags for several minutes as competitors wait in line for their catch to be weighed.
2. The bag of fish is dumped into a wash-tub style sink to verify size, species and life-condition of the bass. Some handling of the fish takes place here. The water is drained into the competitor's weigh-bag to be used for transporting the fish to a release boat following the weigh-in.



3. The bass are then placed into a laundry basket (or similar device) with lots of large holes. A heavy plastic plate (or even another laundry basket) is placed on top of the fish in an attempt to reduce their flopping around in order to stabilize the weigh scales so their weight can be recorded. Sometimes the process of getting them stable takes a minute or more.
4. Finally, the big fish may be weighed separately. Sometimes the larger fish are held up by the competitors for camera shots. Ultimately, the fish are dumped back into the weigh bag with the original live-well water and transported to the release boats(s).
5. The fish are dumped into the release boat live wells. When full, the release boat takes them to a non-designated area and someone handles them again as they are tossed overboard.

I'm sure most of you have personally observed (or even participated in) weigh-ins where many of the bass are without oxygen for more than 5 minutes (sometimes much more). Sadly, this is not uncommon at all.

So what are the issues and how can we reduce the damage? Let's look at it step-by-step:

1. **Issues:** In the warmer months of the year, 5 bass in a bag with a nominal amount of water can deplete the oxygen within 2 minutes. Fish caught at deeper levels (increasingly common as fishing pressure increases) with their air bladders expanded are often not "fizzed" (a process for releasing the air bladder pressure) by the competitor. Unless this is done, these fish seldom survive (unless released immediately).
  - a. **Oxygen Solutions:** *There are two simple steps that can be taken to improve this: 1) Minimize the number of competitors who can bag fish at a given time – require them to use your bags and only hand out 2-3 at a time; and 2) provide these competitors with battery-powered bag aerators. These are inexpensive and available from major online bass gear retailers.*
  - b. **Fizzing Solution:** *Ensure competitors are provided with needles, instructions and diagrams prior to the tournament. If possible, hold a short "clinic": the evening prior.*
2. **Issue:** The handling of bass with bare hands can lead to slime-coat damage and diseases due to natural secretions and bacteria on our skin.
  - a. **Solution:** *Wear rubber gloves whenever handling bass. Try to reduce their flopping around in the tub.*
3. **Issues:** As the fish flop around in the basket, their heads and tails can poke through holes in the basket. This flopping around leads to scale and slime-coat damage from the basket and fins of the other fish. During this time they are without oxygen, exposed directly to the air, and damaging their slime coats on the basket(s). If gloves were not used to put the fish into the basket, they can also pick up damage and diseases from the handler's hands.



- a. **Solution:** See note above about rubber gloves. Tare (zero) the scales with an empty weigh bag. Instead of dumping the fish into the basket, drop them into the weigh bag, wrap them up to minimize movement, and put them in the basket. This significantly reduces the damage to the fish as well as speeding up the weigh-in considerably. It is much faster to get the weight when the fish are stabilized by being wrapped in the bag.
4. **Issue:** The original weigh bag contains depleted oxygen water.
  - a. **Solutions:** Provide a tank of aerated water treated with one of the popular chemicals for reducing stress and preventing disease. Partially fill the weigh bag with this water before putting the bass back into the bag for transport to the release boat. An option would be to use the battery-powered bag aerator to treat the bag during the weighing process.
5. **Issues:** The release boats livewells are often filled beyond the aerator capacity. In an effort to release the fish quickly to return for another load (or due to lack of a needle or education in the technique), fish that have distended bladders may not be fized.
  - a. **Solutions:** Always designate 1 release boat for every 5 competitors (minimum). Provide them with catch-and-release chemicals. This will greatly improve the chance of survival for these fish by providing increased oxygen, reducing stress, increasing their slime coat production and reducing the number of fish released in a given area. Be sure the people assigned to release boats have the proper tools and training to accomplish the fizing procedure. Failure to do this to bass with distended air bladders is a death sentence for these fish.

I hope this provides you with the incentive to improve your weigh-in procedures. If you are already using these processes, I applaud you and encourage you to keep it up. I also ask that do all you can to encourage other clubs to follow these procedures.

I welcome your comments and suggestions.

See you on the water.

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