

PADDLEFISH LICENSE LOTTERY

Over the past 20 years, North Dakota's paddlefish season has gone through many adjustments in an effort to maintain a popular angling opportunity while at the same time protecting a unique and vulnerable resource.

In recent years a fair number of people who bought special paddlefish tags missed out because the season closed early when a quota of 1,000 fish was reached well before the 31-day season would have ended otherwise.

With an emergency amendment to the two-year fishing proclamation this year, the Game and Fish Department is adding an option of snag-and-release-only fishing for up to a week after the regular season closes, or until May 31, whichever comes first. The potential for up to seven days of snag-and-release is a way to provide opportunity to people who bought a paddlefish tag and either didn't catch a fish, or didn't even have a chance to go before the season closed.

While this is a rather minor change that won't involve too many people, fisheries biologists are exploring other options for the future. One possible option would have the Game and Fish Department initiate a lottery for a limited number of paddlefish tags. This would replace the current system whereby individuals may only buy one tag a season, but there is no limit on the number of people who can buy a paddlefish license.

In either case, the annual paddlefish harvest from the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers in North Dakota will remain at about 1,000 in the near term. For the past several years, both the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks have established a maximum harvest of 1,000 paddlefish in their respective states.

With a lottery, a limited number of people would get licenses, but the snagging season could stay open for a much longer period of time, because fishing pressure wouldn't be concentrated in a small window of time as people try to get their fish before the quota is reached.

To understand why this option is up for discussion, it's important to review the history of paddlefish regulations in North Dakota.

Paddlefish Regulations

In North Dakota, paddlefish live in the Missouri River System. They are the state's largest fish, sometimes growing to more than 5 feet in length and weighing more than 100 pounds. They can live up to 50 years.

Most North Dakota paddlefish live upstream of Garrison Dam in Lake Sakakawea. In spring, mature paddlefish, typically age 10 or older, make a spawning run out of the reservoir and into the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Many of these fish continue upstream into Montana.

Paddlefish live on a diet of mostly algae and plankton and therefore are not readily caught on hook and line. They can, however, be caught with hooks dragged through the river where they are congregating.

While Montana allowed paddlefish snagging in the 1960s, North Dakota's first established paddlefish season was in 1976. The daily and possession limit was two fish and the season ran from early May to mid-November.

For many years after that, the season remained long and the daily and possession limits varied between one and two. Game and Fish estimates placed the annual harvest in North Dakota's portions of the Yellowstone and Missouri at 2,500 to 5,000 fish.



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As paddlefish snagging gradually gained popularity, biologists began studying these unusual fish in greater detail and determined the overall Lake Sakakawea-Missouri-Yellowstone population was declining.

Whether the decline was related to habitat changes or snagging or a combination of the two, starting in 1992 the Game and Fish Department began to make changes to reduce annual paddlefish mortality. In that year, the Department started issuing tags to snaggers, which limited annual take to two fish per person.

Since then North Dakota and Montana cooperatively established an annual harvest cap. It started out at 3,000 in 1995 and over the past several years has been reduced to 2,000 – 1,000 for each state.

To maintain harvest below the cap while still not limiting the number of participants, Game and Fish has reduced the length of the snagging season from 46 to 31 days; established daylight-only snagging hours; and closed an eight-mile stretch of Missouri River to snagging.

In addition to these changes, Game and Fish also keeps track of daily harvest, and has an option to close the paddlefish season with a 60-hour notice if it appears the harvest cap will be exceeded prior to the closing date on the calendar.

Last May, the season was open only 13 days before 1,000 paddlefish were caught. In 2005 it lasted just 14 days, and in 2004 it was 28 days.

Low flows in the Yellowstone and Missouri the past few years makes snagging easier because fish are more concentrated. In addition, snagging pressure is becoming more focused toward earlier in the season because people are aware of the potential for early closure and want to make sure they get their opportunity.

On the other hand, people who plan snagging trips for later in the season, such as over the long Memorial Day weekend, have been left wanting because of early closures.

Extending this year's season for snag-and-release is an effort to provide more recreation. Past studies have shown that mortality is minimal for paddlefish that are snagged and released. In recent years, Game and Fish has, for the first time since paddlefishing started in the mid-1970s, allowed snagging and releasing on a couple of weekdays during the open season.

This departure from longstanding practice, however, is not the same as catch-and-release of other fish. On Mondays and Tuesdays, all paddlefish caught must be released. On the other five days, all paddlefish caught must be kept. There are no days when anglers can choose whether to keep or release a paddlefish, and people who tag a paddlefish cannot continue to fish on release-only days.

Paddlefishing near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

Release-only or keep-only days prevent a practice called high-grading, or continual releasing of fish until a big enough one is caught. This spreads out harvest over a wide range of sizes and ages, rather than concentrating harvest on the largest fish, which are mostly mature females.

Despite these new measures designed to spread out paddlefish harvest, the 2,500-3,000 people who buy a paddlefish license each year are quickly realizing that if they don't get out early in the season, their window of opportunity might be gone. This intensifies snagging pressure and creates unpleasant and sometimes unmanageable competition for space at popular paddlefishing access areas.

Under the current system, or with a lottery system, the annual paddlefish harvest cap from North Dakota waters will not change. Here's a look at the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of allocating paddlefish licenses. **From Both Sides.**

One Side

- The current system allows more people the chance to participate. One-tag purchase is uncomplicated, both for the fishing public, and for Game and Fish to administer.
- With a catch-and-release-only season extension in effect for this year, snaggers who don't tag a paddlefish can still participate.
- A lottery system would need to take into account the Yellowstone River runoff. High(er) flows would mean more tags could be issued due to anticipated poorer success.
- Estimating the number of tags to issue would be difficult. If the number is conservative and fishing is poor, the harvest would be lower than the cap and anglers would miss out on a recreational opportunity. If a liberal number of tags is issued, and snagging is good, it would still require an early season closure, which would defeat the purpose of a tag lottery system.

The Other Side

- Issuing limited tags would reduce crowding at camping and fishing areas.
- People who received licenses could plan a weekend trip without worrying that the season would close before they had a chance to go.
- If reducing the paddlefish harvest cap was necessary, Game and Fish would simply be able to reduce the number of tags issued.
- Snag-and-release-only days could still be open for people who do not receive a license via lottery.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.