

The Need for a Live Wild Baitfish Regulation

A common practice for anglers is to capture their bait before fishing for their preferred sport fish. However today, with the new threats that we now face with the introduction of many invasive aquatic nuisance species, this practice must be controlled to better protect Alabama's valuable aquatic and fisheries resources. As a result, new regulation has been adopted by the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) to restrict the transport of live wild-caught bait fish between the public freshwater lakes, rivers, reservoirs and drainage basins within Alabama.

This regulation only pertains to the transport of baitfish that are alive. Dead baitfish that are being held on ice or preserved in some fashion for transport to another location or waterbody are not included in this regulation.

There are presently three species of invasive fish that are considered an immediate threat. Silver carp, one of four Asian carp species that have been introduced into the U.S., became established as wild populations in the Mississippi River in the 1990's. Now these fish are working their way up the Tennessee River into Alabama and the leading edge of this invasion is now in Pickwick Lake and possibly further. Exploding silver carp populations have had catastrophic effects on sportfish and commercial fisheries in parts of the Midwest, essentially displacing many native fish species. Silver carp, which can reach 100 pounds in weight, have also become a hazard to recreational boating activities due to their habit of jumping high out of the water when startled.

Blueback herring, a species native to the east coast of the U.S. were illegally introduced into Lewis Smith Lake sometime prior to 2010 and soon afterward into Lake Martin. Potentially reaching 16 inches in length, blueback herring are slowly altering the fish population dynamics in these two lakes and there are real concerns of eventual adverse effects on native sport fish species. Since these introductions, blueback herring have begun moving downstream in both of these river systems. They have also been introduced into the Chattahoochee River Basin in Georgia and are now found as far downstream as West Point Lake.

Alewife, another east coast native, has also been introduced outside of their native range into the upper Tennessee, Coosa and Chattahoochee River Basins. They can reach up to 10 inches in length and can compete with native fish species. Alewife invaded the upper Great Lakes in the 1950's through the Welland Canal and significantly altered the native fish communities in these lakes. In 2018, an alewife was collected by WFF biologists in the Coosa River below Neely Henry Dam. The introductions of both blueback herring and alewife within the Southeastern U.S. are believed to be the result of accidental or intentional baitfish releases by anglers.

The accidental transport of non-native species alongside native live baitfish is a likely occurrence due to their similar appearances. Although adult silver carp are relatively easy to identify, the appearance of juveniles is very similar to many of our native baitfish species. Young blueback herring and alewife can also be easily mistaken for our native baitfish species, even by experienced anglers and trained fisheries biologists that do not take the time to carefully examine them.

The new regulation, along with the assistance from anglers, should protect Alabama's valuable aquatic resources.