

# Competitive Fishing Event Guidelines and Best Practices

## **Tournaments**

Minimizing tournament catch and release mortality and the impact it can have on a fishery is an important consideration for Competitive Fishing Event (CFE) organizers. Organizers should always strive to operate events with the best interests of the fish in mind. The following guidelines and best practices are presented to help CFE organizers achieve this goal.

## **General**

- Event organizers should ensure that all participants demonstrate a high degree of sportsmanship, safety and conservation.
- Event organizers must promote good fish handling practices at all times. Officials who handle, weigh and / or release fish must know how to do so properly and ensure that all handling of fish results in minimal harm, as poor handling procedures will result in increased mortality.
- “Artificial Baits Only” CFE’s will help to lower fish mortality vs CFE’s with live or dead natural baits.
- Participants who do not comply with Saskatchewan’s Fisheries Regulations should be disqualified.
- Ministry staff will not act in a judicial capacity at any CFE.
- Ministry staff will not tag fish for promotional purposes.
- The Ministry will discourage CFE’s which it perceives as having a detrimental impact on the targeted fish species.

## **Event Locations**

- Tournaments should be held in locations that afford a simple and efficient operation, with adequate facilities and personnel to accommodate the anticipated number of participants and fish. Poor organization, procedures, facilities and inadequate personnel will result in increased fish mortality.
- Prior to any event, organizers should strive to resolve potential local user concerns / conflicts from the area in which the event is being held.
- The size of the fishing area designated for the CFE will impact the length of time fish are retained in livewells and the distance traveled between fishing areas and weigh-in locations.

## **Seasonal Timing of Events**

- Tournaments should avoid warm weather conditions that are typical during July / August and should focus on cooler weather periods, as cooler water temperatures are more favorable for fish survival.
- Organizers should have a contingency plan for when adverse weather conditions occur (e.g. high winds / waves, surface water temperatures exceed 20°C, etc.) that considers such actions as the possible postponement of the tournament until more favorable conditions prevail, or reducing the event hours, fishing area, fish limits and / or changing weigh-in station locations, etc.
- Organizers must ensure that all participants are aware of the definition of “adverse weather” and what potential measures may result if declared.
- For most species other than lake trout, swim bladder problems (expansion / rupture) most frequently occur when fish are caught at depths greater than 9 m. This problem is most likely to be encountered during late summer and fall events when fish are more liable to key on deep water

forage patterns. Organizers should consider restricting deep water capture of fish to less than 9m and if necessary, define an eligible zone for the event that excludes anglers from deep-water areas.

- Venting of distended swim bladders or “fizzing” is not permitted at CFEs and is discouraged at any time.

### **Weigh-in Location**

- Weigh-in location(s) should be situated close to the main fishing area(s) and should be sheltered from prevailing winds and direct sunlight.
- Organizers should consider using multiple weigh stations for CFE’s with expansive tournament boundaries to reduce travel time and stress on fish.
- Boundaries for ice fishing events should be no more than 500 m from the weigh-in site.
- The weigh-site should be located close to an adequate dock to allow for quick processing of fish from boat to weigh scale.
- Weigh sites should be located near water of sufficient depth ( $\geq 3\text{m}$ ) and water quality (away from boat traffic).
- Use staggered / trickle starts and finish times to distribute weigh-in traffic at day’s end, thereby reducing line-ups / backlog at weigh stations. Long line-ups result in greater stress on fish due to reduced water quality around docking areas and longer delays in releasing fish back into their natural environment.
- Require or allow participants to weigh-in either early or multiple times per day.

### **Event and Weigh-In: Staff / Volunteers**

- Assign specific duties and responsibilities to staff/volunteers to cover all aspects of the weigh-in. Conduct an orientation to ensure everyone is adequately prepared for their duties.
- Designate a weigh-in supervisor for each weigh-in station. Supervisors should be resolute in nature, be visibly identifiable and must be present at all times during the weigh-in as they carry out their assigned duties.
- Designate one individual at each weigh-in site to oversee the proper handling and care of fish, monitoring water quality, ensuring that tanks have proper aeration / water exchange and assessing the condition and needs of fish, etc.

### **Weigh-In: Process**

- Organizers should consider using techniques for measuring fish that do not subject fish to a dry weight measurement, thereby minimizing handling / air exposure and subsequently mortality (eg: length measurement, water displacement weigh-in, catch-record-release, etc.). Measuring fish without removing them from the water is the most preferred type of live release CFE.
- The weigh scales used should be simple to operate and ideally should lock on to a weight quickly to minimize the time needed to get an accurate weight of the fish.
- To minimize handling of fish, judging of fish by tournament officials should be done in the livewells of angler’s boats, or if necessary in the staging tank rather than a second judging tank. Officials judging fish should be decisive.
- Fish should be handled quickly and gently through the weigh-in procedure, striving to keep the processing time from livewell to post weigh-in release to under one minute.

- Use a well aerated staging tank(s) that allows fish to be held in water while awaiting weigh-in at the weigh station. Fish should be transported from the livewell to the staging tank in containers with good quality water. Judging of fish may be considered at this point if not possible in the livewell.
- Fish should be transferred to weigh containers at the staging tank. Weigh containers should have hinged lids and holes in the sides and bottom to allow for the movement of aerated water while in the staging tank and for the quick drainage of water when transferred to the scale. To minimize handling stress on fish, weigh containers should have upper size marks on the bottom of the container to assist in determining which fish must undergo a more precise length measurement.
- The staging tank(s) should be large, aerated and shaded and have a constant exchange of water with the waterbody. This helps to maintain water temperatures and dissolved oxygen levels, and meet the following requirements:
  - The difference in temperature between the staging tank and surrounding waterbody should not exceed +/- 2° C at any time;
  - Dissolved oxygen levels in the staging tank should remain at or above 8 ppm;
  - The water temperature and dissolved oxygen of the staging tank and surrounding waters should be monitored hourly or more frequently.
- Strive to minimize or eliminate exposure of fish to air to less than 30 seconds in total.
- To help ensure that anglers follow good fish handling practices, CFE's must establish criteria that accounts for stressed and dead fish. Fish judged as stressed or dead should be penalized in an appropriate way – either with a fixed or percent amount of weight deducted from the angler or as ineligible.

### **Post Weigh-In: Fishing Handling and Release**

- When appropriate avoid holding healthy fish in tanks after weigh-in for transport to release sites. Ideally, fish should be released directly from the weigh site to the main lake.
- Stressed fish that show any of the following signs are to be identified and held for observation in a large, aerated recovery (hospital) tank in which water is exchanged with the waterbody:
  - Inability to maintain equilibrium (unassisted);
  - Red coloration to the fish's side and / or fins;
  - Difficulty in swimming to bottom of tank and maintaining its position;
  - Showing signs of distress (e.g. swimming at surface, gulping for air, etc.)
- Stressed fish should be held for observation until they recover (show no symptoms) or die. Fish that are identified as recovered should be released into quiet, calm water away from boat traffic. If the released fish once again becomes stressed and cannot maintain its own equilibrium, it should be retrieved and counted as dead.
- Recovery/holding tanks should have smooth walls with no obstructions to trap or harm the fish and:
  - Circulate fresh clean water at or within 2°C of lake water;
  - Aerated with diffused oxygen;
  - Covered with a removable top and shaded ;
  - Of sufficient size (e.g.: 250 gal stock tank perhaps multiple based on the number of expected fish);
  - No more than 4 feet high

- Water for all tanks should be obtained from main lake areas where there is good circulation. Avoid boat traffic / landing areas (eg: marinas, boat launches or docking areas) to prevent the intake of water contaminated with gas, oil, and motor exhaust.
- Water exchange systems (intake and outflow) and tank water conditions (e.g. temperature) must be monitored regularly to ensure good function and flow.

### **Mortalities**

- Fish hooked or damaged in vital areas (eg: gullet, eyes or gills) should not be released. Care must be taken not to remove the fish's protective body mucus or hold fish by the eyes or gills. Anglers and tournament officials should use wet cotton gloves or knotless dip nets when handling fish.
- Retain and record all dead fish from the event and document the number of stressed fish successfully revived and released.
- Event organizers must plan for the proper disposal of all dead fish and handle all dead fish as food, processing them in a manner that complies with Saskatchewan's sportfishing regulations. Storing these fish in a clean, sterile container packed with ice is recommended.

### **Livewell Management**

- All boat livewells and fish-holding equipment must have a functional water pump or circulation system and be sufficiently sized to handle the anticipated number of fish that are to be retained.
- A livewell size of  $\geq 100$  liters is recommended or as a minimum, should be capable of retaining 0.1 kg of fish per liter of water.
- Larger livewells allow more room for fish, reduce bruising and damage to fish and have more water for the dispersal of harmful waste (eg: ammonia).
- Bruising and harm to fish in livewells can result from overcrowding, less than full water levels and high-speed travel, particularly during windy and wavy conditions. This can lead to infection, disease, or parasite infestation.
- To help minimize mortality, organizers should consider reducing the number of fish that can be retained per boat / angler at any time.
- A good livewell is one that is able to aerate, recirculate and exchange water with the waterbody and is capable of maintaining dissolved oxygen levels above 5 ppm at all times.
- Sudden changes to water temperature increases stress levels of fish. Stressed fish require more dissolved oxygen and excrete more toxic ammonia from their gills. Increased water temperatures or ammonia levels further reduce livewell dissolved oxygen levels.
- Variation of livewell water temperature of more than 2°C from the water body temperature may cause thermal shock of the fish.
- The water exchange system should run continuously or at the very least, cycled at a minimum rate of 50% (eg: five minutes every 10 minutes). Water temperature must be within 1 to 2°C of the lake surface temperature. If livewell water exchange and aerators are not run frequently enough, oxygen levels and temperature can rapidly change to critical levels.
- Recirculating livewells should be operated during high speed travel and near areas of reduced water quality and should be aerated continuously with air stones or spray bars.
- Consider regulating water temperatures in recirculating livewells with non-chlorinated ice or ice packs if livewell temperatures exceed 18° C.

- Never fill livewells in areas of poor water quality (e.g. high water temperatures, muddy areas, etc.). Avoid filling livewells near marinas and boat docks.
- Limiting the retention time of fish in livewells can help to reduce stress on fish and improve post-release mortality.
- The use of chemical fish stimulants (livewell additives) is discouraged.

### **Fish Handling Tips for Anglers**

- Land the fish as quickly as possible to avoid fish exhaustion. The tackle used should match the size of the fish targeted – avoid using intentionally light tackle to prolong a fight.
- Minimizing air exposure of fish is important in limiting post-release mortality.
- Anglers should handle fish by cradling them under the pelvic girdle while gently holding the tail for control. This supports the fish's weight without causing harm. Care must be taken not to remove the fish's protective body mucus while handling fish.
- Anglers should not lift fish by the eyes, gills or caudal peduncle (tail) only.
- Anglers should leave deeply swallowed hooks in a fish's throat rather than attempting to remove the hook, as removing the hook may cause more damage to the fish than leaving it in the fish.
- Other than for lake trout, anglers should refrain from fishing in depths greater than 9 m in catch and release tournaments, as fish taken from these depths experience distended/ruptured swim bladders, resulting in higher mortality.