

Feeding Your Farm Pond Fish

by Tyler Wright, manager, J.A.Manning State Fish Hatchery

Almost every applicant that participates in the ODWC's Farm Pond Stocking Program asks the same questions when they come to pick up their fish. "Should I feed my fish and if so, what should I feed them and how much?" Before we address whether or not to feed, let's take a look at the Farm Pond Stocking Program. Every year, our four state fish hatcheries provide free fish to farm pond owners. The only requirements are:

- The applicant must possess a valid Oklahoma fishing license. (This requirement is even required of anglers who may otherwise be exempt from a state fishing license, such as: 1) Resident owners or tenants, their spouses, parents, grandparents, children and their spouses, grandchildren and their spouses who fish in private ponds on land owned or leased by such owner or tenant. 2) Resident disabled veterans with 60 percent or more disability, and/or Residents having a proven disability rendering them nonambulatory and confined to wheelchairs as certified by a duly qualified physician. 3) Any person legally blind or physically impaired who is unable to properly use fishing apparatus and one accompanying companion while the blind or physically impaired person is fishing.

- The pond must have no fish present. The fish provided through the Farm Pond Stocking Program are small fish, called fry. Therefore, if any predatory fish are present i.e. bass, large bluegill, catfish species, or gar, then the newly stocked fry would quickly be eaten and therefore the stocking is useless. New or old ponds that have completely gone dry would obviously qualify; however, existing ponds must be "reclaimed," which is a process whereby a pond is treated with a poison to kill all of the fish present. The poison (commonly called Rotenone) dissipates quickly and allows the pond to be restocked after a couple of weeks.

- The pond must be at least 1/4 surface acre in size.

Okay, so you've met the above criteria and you picked up your bluegill and catfish fry in the summer, and put them into your pond. Then you've been notified by the hatchery a few months later that you can come get your bass fry. Once the fish are in the pond, chances are you're going to want to do what you can to help them



Due to their ability to be trained to feed on processed feed, combined with their efficient conversion of feed into body mass, channel catfish growth rates can be significantly improved through supplemental feeding.

along. But when I get questions as to whether or not to feed the fish, the following is my usual response.

It is certainly not necessary to provide supplemental feed for your fish population if you have followed the ODWC's guidelines of the proper number of large-mouth bass, bluegill and channel catfish fry for your size of pond. The bluegill will provide excellent forage for maintaining the bass and, to a slight extent, your catfish populations. Making a significant improvement in growth rates with your bass and bluegill, is at best a more difficult

undertaking that probably relies more on "harvest management" than supplemental feeding. Bass are live fish predators and traditionally don't feed well on processed fish foods. Bluegill will feed successfully on processed fish feeds, but it also takes critical management and harvest of both your bluegill and your bluegill predators (large-mouth bass) in order to wind up with a trophy bluegill fishery. If your goal is to create a trophy bass pond, then again it takes strict management and harvest techniques on your

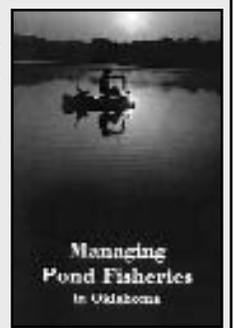
bass, and can be enhanced with stockings of some minnow species such as fat-head minnows or golden shiners. Details of these techniques used for creating a trophy bass or quality bluegill pond fishery can be found in the ODWC's "Managing Pond Fisheries in Oklahoma" booklet (\$3 by mail or picked up from ODWC field offices).

However, a much simpler avenue for feeding your farm pond fish and making a significant impact to their growth and health relies on your third, "bonus" species, which are your channel catfish.

Okay, so what do you feed your channel cats? In the past, people have fed catfish a little bit of everything including dog food, grain, cattle cubes, bread, etc. Nowadays, there is no reason not to feed your fish a good quality food. Almost all farm supply stores carry some kind of commercial catfish food. Your fish should grow faster and be healthier when provided a quality feed specially formulated for fish. Catfish can be easily trained to respond to a floating food. Bluegill will also use the feed but bass may not respond in significant numbers. Floating feeds are best, because they allow the pond owner to monitor the feeding activity.

The next question is probably the hardest to answer. "How much do I feed them?" There is no simple answer to this question. It depends on several factors, such as the time

"Managing Pond Fisheries in Oklahoma" is sold at any ODWC field office or at www.wildlifedepartment.com for \$3. Whether you own a pond or just like to fish in ponds, you'll want to own this booklet. This 44-page publication includes full-color photos and texts on pond construction, placement of structure, controlling vegetation, proper levels of fish harvest, and much more!



of year, water quality, size and number of fish, and if pond aeration is available. Typically, start out feeding one-half to one pound of feed per surface acre of water. Another "rule of thumb" is to feed only what the fish will eat in 5-10 minutes. As the water temperatures start dropping in the fall, the fish will eat less and will eventually stop altogether. When they stop eating, stop feeding. Next spring when the water begins to warm up, gradually start feeding again.