

Operations and Procedures for a Fishing Derby

There are as many ways to conduct a fishing derby as there are fishing derbies. The following is a description of the procedures used in several large (more than 1,000 participants) and successful fishing derbies.

Schedule and Duration

The fishing derby should have a fixed start and end time. Certainly, this is necessary if there is competition for awards or prizes are given away, but it is also necessary if addresses by dignitaries or officials are planned. If the event is youth oriented, the derby should not be longer than 3 hours. Registration should begin 30 minutes to 1 hour before the start of fishing time and continue into the fishing time. All facilities should be set up and operational, and all officials and volunteers should be present before registration opens.

Registration

All participants (or their parents or guardians) must complete a registration card before fishing. The registration card is a 5-by-8-inch hard paper card (ideally waterproof). Printed on the front of the card are the rules of the fishing derby; blanks for name, address, and age; and several user-related questions (optional). The back is blank. Instruct the participants (or their parents or guardians) to read the rules before fishing. Have an official check the cards for legibility at the registration table. Tell participants to keep the card throughout the fishing derby and return the card to the registration table at the end of the event to receive a participation prize and qualify for awards. The card may be hole-punched in one corner and twine or cord inserted to form a necklace; this makes it convenient for the angler and reduces the loss of registration cards. (See sample card.)

Sample Registration Card

Rules:

1. All fish must be caught by hook-and-line.
2. All fish must be measured by a derby official, who will place a sticker on the back of the card.
3. You must fish only from the bank.
4. You must turn in this card by (time) to be eligible for prizes.

Name: _____ Age: _____

Address: _____ County: _____

School: _____

Have you participated in a fishing derby before? yes no

Is this your first time to fish? yes no

How often do you fish? once a week once a month once a year

Would you like to fish more often? yes no

Would you like to learn more about fishing? yes no

Rules

Rules should be simple. For example, rules for a fishing derby might include these:

1. All fish must be caught by hook and line.
2. All participants ages 16 to 64 must have a current Mississippi fishing license (or the license regulation appropriate for the location of the fishing derby).
3. All fish must be measured by a derby official (derby officials are wearing derby T-shirts or other prominent insignia such as hats).
4. The card must be turned in by (specify the time) to receive prizes and be considered for awards.
5. You must fish only from the bank.

The specifics of Rule 2 (fishing license) may vary from state to state; check your state's fishing regulations. Also, this rule may not be necessary if your derby coincides with the state's Free Fishing Day during National Fishing Week. Keep the rules short and simple. Do not try to cover all possible conditions with the rules printed on the fishing card. Long lists of rules usually mean the derby is too complicated.

The registration card is a good way to learn about your angler population or get feedback about a fishery program or the derby. Depending on the questions, it is possible to learn how often people fish, how much they spend to fish, where they like to fish, what they like to catch, and so on. This is a good opportunity to determine if they are interested in participating in other events or programs such as 4-H Youth Sportfishing. Keep the questions simple. Multiple-choice questions will provide more information than open-ended questions. When this technique was used in several derbies, the response rate to multiple-choice questions was 74–79 percent, but the response rate to “What suggestions do you have to improve the fishery?” was only 15 percent.

Fish Population

It may be appropriate, or even necessary, to build a fish community specifically for a fishing derby. This should be done several years in advance of a fishing derby by managing a lake for large populations of fish vulnerable to angling. Do this in cooperation with the appropriate fishery management agency (usually the state fish and wildlife department). It may be possible to close a water body or a segment of water body to fishing for at least 1 month before the fishing derby to help maintain high density and high catchability of the fish. It is hard to keep people from fishing water with abundant fish. One solution is to use a body of water that is restricted to

catch-and-release only or has high minimum size limits. For more information, see MSU Extension Publication 3773 *A Basis for Competition in Fishing Derbies*.

In some cases, it may be necessary to use put-and-take stocking (that is, stocking catchable-sized fish before opening the fishery) to create a catchable fish population. Fish should be stocked enough ahead of time to allow maximum return of the stocked fish. This length of time will vary among the species, or even the strain of a species, stocked. The manager of the hatchery supplying the fish can provide this information. To get high catch rates of fish, you should stock fish at high densities (at least 500 fish per acre) and close the area to fishing from the time of stocking until the derby starts.

Depending on the species of fish likely to be caught, it can be desirable to “bait” the fishing area. Fish can often be attracted to the fishing area (such as close to the bank or a fishing pier) with a variety of commercially available products or feed corn. Check on the legality of baiting (“chumming”) in your state. An alternative, if several months' lead-time is available, is to dump a couple cubic yards of pea gravel in several shallow places to attract spawning sunfishes to within easy reach of bank anglers.

When the Fish Don't Bite

Have a planned activity in case few or no people catch fish. One easy and quickly implemented activity is a casting contest. The contest aspect provides a substitute for selecting winners and giving the awards you planned.

Anchor large floats (such as empty milk jugs) or floating rings (for example, hula hoops or rings made of PVC pipe) at different distances from shore. Casting plugs or a bobber snapped to a loop tied at the end of the line is safer than hooks. Make up a system of points for closeness to the target in case no one hits the target. The number of casts allowed to each participant will be determined by the number of participants and the time available. Casting contests can also be easily conducted on the shore, reducing problems associated with floats and such in the water.

You may find other activity ideas in the lesson plans and curriculum materials for the Mississippi 4-H Youth Sportfishing Program.

Personnel

The largest, and possibly the most difficult, part of the fishing derby is getting enough workers. Several officials

will be needed at the derby. These officials are usually volunteers. Officials can be any enthusiastic people interested in helping young people and families enjoy wholesome recreation. Good sources of officials are civic clubs, fishing clubs, and senior citizen groups. If your officials are from an organized group such as one of those above, involve them in the derby planning process early. These people can be a significant resource not only on the day of the derby—among this diverse group of individuals may be people with experience or personal contacts that will contribute greatly to a successful event.

People will be needed for setting up the site, registering participants, distributing participation prizes, distributing materials, controlling the crowd, determining awards, communicating, and coordinating officials. The number of people will depend on the size of the event. It is a good idea to have one or more people take pictures at the event.

The greatest personnel need will be derby officials to assist participants and, if you follow the above procedure for measuring fish, to measure and record the lengths of fish caught. You should have at least one derby official for every 20 participants. Ask the derby officials to be at the registration area 30 minutes before fishing begins to receive any last-minute instructions, to get necessary equipment (measuring board, pencil, registration cards, adhesive labels, paper punch), and to get their derby official T-shirts, hats, or other insignia.

Providing derby officials with a T-shirt or other recognizable insignia accomplishes two purposes: (1) the derby officials are easily recognized by participants and other derby officials and (2) it gives the derby officials something for their volunteer efforts. In large quantities, good-quality printed T-shirts should cost less than \$8 each. Caps or large buttons are lower-cost alternatives to derby T-shirts. The way you identify derby officials should be stated in the rules.

Schedule two 30- to 45-minute briefings for officials in the week before the derby, and encourage the officials to attend one of the meetings. Hold these briefings at convenient times and locations. Two meetings make it more likely the officials can attend one of the meetings. At the meeting, tell the officials when you want their assistance and explain the rules and fish handling and measuring procedures. Ask the officials to bring to the derby a watch, pliers or similar device for removing hooks, and a couple of hooks and sinkers (just in case a participant loses the only hook he or she brought). You may opt to furnish these items and other items of equipment. Be brief and keep the explanations

simple—do not delve into details. Leave 15–20 minutes for questions.

After the Fishing Ends

The participants turn in their fishing cards at the end or anytime before the end of the fishing period. The information on the registration cards is the only way to know the outcome of the competition. Several officials will staff the registration tables to receive the fishing cards. These officials should check each card to be sure the name and address are legible; if awards are given for different age categories, be sure the age is legible. Officials in the fishing area should encourage participants to move quickly to the registration area to turn in their registration cards. Someone at the awards area should use the public address system repeatedly to remind participants to return their registration cards.

Participation Prizes

All participants like to take something home. Participation prizes have several benefits: they attract people to the event and they are an incentive for registration, for getting all fish measured, and for timely return of registration cards (especially if the participant did not catch any fish). Distributing participation prizes after the scheduled end of the fishing period provides an activity for the crowd while officials are summing catches and determining winners.

Your resources determine participation prizes. A button or a patch is a low-cost way of rewarding participation and creating publicity for future events. Contributions from local businesses are appreciated by the recipients and promote the businesses. Label contributed items to show the source of the contribution, and be sure to acknowledge all contributions with a letter of appreciation that includes an estimated value of the contribution. Although fishing tackle or outdoor equipment makes appropriate participation prizes for a fishing derby, participants also like food coupons, merchandise coupons, or movie or event passes.

Awards and Awards Ceremony

There can be numerous categories of awards—by participant age categories, biggest fish, most inches, tagged fish, team competition, and so on. However, remember that giving many awards makes the rules more complex and prolongs the awards ceremony. We suggest keeping the award structure simple. Avoid an

award category that hints at discrimination or having so many categories that there may be only one or two participants in a category.

An awards ceremony, conducted by one or several masters of ceremony (MCs), begins at the end of the fishing time. The awards ceremony is pivotal to a successful fishing derby. The MCs should be people who are skilled at controlling and entertaining a crowd; people who have devoted much time to planning or conducting the derby do not necessarily make good MCs. The MCs make sure all participants turn in fishing cards and assemble all participants and spectators in one location. Obviously, awards are to be given, but this segment of the derby is also an opportunity to inform (about your fishing program or a conservation topic, for example) and credit sponsors. If scoring the cards requires more than 5 minutes, you can present a short educational message and/or a plug for your 4-H Sportfishing Program. It is important to keep the crowd controlled and entertained before the awards presentation. Our experience has shown that this is the best time for an educational message. The crowd will likely be most responsive in this period, after fishing but before awards. If you plan later

events, the awards ceremony is an opportunity to create a positive attitude in the audience. The awards ceremony should last no longer than 30 minutes.

For More Information

Additional information about planning and conducting fishing derbies is available in the Extension fishing derby series of publications:

[P3769 *What Is a Fishing Derby?*](#)

[P3770 *Planning and Organizing a Fishing Derby*](#)

[P3666 *Selecting a Site for a Fishing Derby*](#)

[P3771 *Facilities Required for a Fishing Derby*](#)

[P3772 *Publicizing and Promoting a Fishing Derby*](#)

[P3773 *A Basis for Competition in Fishing Derbies*](#)

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