

History of freshwater fish stocking in Florida:

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Florida is an angler's paradise with abundant areas to fish and boat. Encompassing more than 7,700 lakes that total more than 3 million acres of fishable water, 12,000 miles of rivers and streams, and with nearly 1.5 million freshwater anglers taking advantage of this resource, Florida provides a wide variety of opportunities to enjoy nature and wet a line. However, sometimes nature needs a little boost.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) operates two freshwater fish hatcheries to help support and manage these important resources. [Blackwater Fisheries Development Center](#) in the panhandle, and the [Florida Bass Conservation Center](#) in central Florida. Both hatcheries play an important role in management of Florida's freshwater resources through rearing and stocking healthy fish in state water bodies. The hatcheries combine their efforts to stock over three million freshwater sportfish annually (See [SERF](#) to learn about saltwater hatcheries). This includes important species such as [Florida largemouth bass](#), Atlantic and Gulf race [striped bass](#), [striped bass hybrids](#), [channel catfish](#), [bluegill](#), [redecor sunfish](#), and [black crappie](#).

The role of fish hatcheries in the early years was considerably different than it is today. The first State Department of Game and Fresh Water (Sic) Fish was established in 1925. Governor Martin pointed out that game and fish were "one of the state's most valuable commercial assets, as well as one of her greatest tourist attractions. Our fresh and salt water fish should be conserved and the supply increased by the employment of scientific methods of propagation." Fishing licenses (\$2 resident and \$5 non-resident) were sold to help conserve these resources. By 1927, restocking programs, education programs, restricted seasons, tight bag limits and setting aside land under the "Florida Plan" for breeding grounds were helping restore fish and wildlife. In 1929 the first state fish hatchery at Winter Haven went into production. It is no longer part of the state hatchery system.



In 1946 the first trained fishery biologist was hired by the state and in 1948 following research findings in Florida and throughout the southeast, it was decided that stocking fry and fingerling bass (ca. 1-inch long was the standard at the time) was fruitless in established fisheries with bass and other predators. It wasn't until 1965 that the Richloam Hatchery in Sumter County and Blackwater Hatchery in Santa Rosa County were constructed.

At the time, state-hatchery fish were supplied to private farm ponds, since stocking native species in state waters was typically unnecessary due to Florida's abundant habitat. The idea was that stocking private fishing waters would reduce harvest from public waters. Those policies were changed in the early 1980's when commercial aquaculture facilities

began producing enough native sportfish to sell to the private sector and removed the burden from the state hatcheries. Subsequently, increases in the state's population and fishing pressure, and the effect of regulated water levels and declining water quality on habitat in a large number of Florida's natural lakes, lead to the need to provide native sport fish to augment environmental stress.

Today's FWC hatcheries are equipped to stock numerous public water bodies to ensure quality recreational fishing. Ongoing research to improve stocking methods for important native species (e.g., stocking larger genetically appropriate Florida largemouth bass at times when they have the best chance for survival) and to document the contribution these fish make ensures the entire program is cost-effective.

FWC hatcheries helped develop the technology to produce, certify and stock triploid grass carp that consume aquatic plants and reduce the need for herbicides. Approximately 100 small to moderate size Florida lakes benefit from these fish, although most are currently purchased from commercial hatcheries, due to the vast acreage required for their production. That allows the limited space at the state hatcheries to be used to produce and stock approximately three million sportfish annually in public waters, which supplements natural fisheries and collectively provide enjoyment to 1.5 million freshwater anglers that generate an economic impact of \$2.4 billion and help support 23,500 jobs in Florida.