

Anglers want larger bass in Kentucky waterways. State biologists are fighting it

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JOHNSON COUNTY

Legislation awaiting a final vote in the Kentucky Senate would strip state game wardens of their ability to enforce most fishing laws on private land and settle a growing controversy between regulators and angler groups who want to stock non-native, hybrid bass.

Momentum for the bill, sponsored by Sen. Gary Boswell, R-Owensboro, and supported by many of the state’s most prominent sporting groups, has stalled as dueling amendments pile up over the effect it would have on the state’s fish and game enforcer.

At issue is whether a hybrid species of Florida bass, called F1, should be swimming in Kentucky’s lakes, ponds and streams. Many anglers prefer F1 bass for their size and vigor, but the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources insists the hybrids threaten the state’s native population of northern largemouth bass.

Fishing enthusiasts tell the Herald-Leader they were stunned when the department instituted a statewide moratorium on releasing F1 bass in 2023, a move they say put some commercial operators out of business and drew a line between the fishing community and the wardens that oversee it.

That showdown could come to a head over SB



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Paintsville Lake in Johnson County has emerged ground zero for a simmering controversy over the right to stock hybrid Florida bass in Kentucky waters.

39, which would overturn KDFWR’s F1 freeze and give landowners the right to stock their own lakes and ponds with whichever exotic species they choose.

“If you did a poll of the bass fishermen in Kentucky, they would all say they want Florida bass because it’s a huge economic tool,” said Chuck Meade, chair of Kentucky’s fish and game commission. “Most people in the fishing industry know this would work.”

LAWMAKERS CLASH OVER CONTRASTING AMENDMENTS

Boswell’s bill would exempt private landowners from any fishing restrictions related to the creel, possession, size or method of fishing on their own land. Property owners could stock most non-invasive fish, and they would be free to extend most fishing exemptions to anyone else

on their property. “We talk about wanting to get rid of overburdensome regulation,” Boswell said. “This is how we do that.”

The bill sailed through committee, but it has hit a roadblock since landing on the Senate floor. Boswell and fellow Republican Sen. Robin Webb, of Grayson, have been lobbying amendments at each other that would tweak language to restrict how fishing exemptions could be handed down, strengthen some game warden tools and put strict definitions on words or phrases like “private lake or pond” and “farmland.”

Both lawmakers insist they are not working together. Boswell called Webb’s contributions “unfriendly amendments.”

Although he said he believes the F1 bass issue is moot — most largemouth bass in the state

already have some Florida bass characteristics, Boswell said — his bill is fundamentally about the right of landowners to do what they want on their land.

But the water that flows on that land and the species that inhabit it are part of the public trust, Webb said. A native of Eastern Kentucky, she said she is all too familiar with how flash floods can temporarily reshape a landscape. An isolated lake or pond can quickly become inundated by floodwater from a nearby river or stream, and the fish will intermingle.

“I’m not fighting the fish fight,” Webb told the Herald-Leader. “I’d rather have the biologists do that.”

COMMISSION OVERRULES BIOLOGISTS, FEDS OVERRULE COMMISSION

Last year, KDFWR biologists put up a good fight, but they were overruled by Meade and several other members of the fish and wildlife commission.

Anglers have been trying for years to convince the department to stock Paintsville Lake in Johnson County with F1 bass. Meade, whose commission district encompasses most of the public lake, took up the issue just moments after being elected chair during a May 2025 meeting.

Kentucky’s chief fisheries biologist interrupted the commission’s pro-

ceedings moments after Meade introduced the measure.

“I don’t think it is an overstatement to say I cannot recall a more consequential moment for the future management of Kentucky fisheries,” the program’s director, Dave Dreves, read aloud from a written statement. “I believe what we have occurring here during this debate these last few meetings can be termed ‘biological relativism’ — that there’s no objective truth, but, rather, I have my truth, you have your truth. However, that is not science.”

The science, Dreves said, is clear: Northern largemouth bass are native to Kentucky, and Florida bass are not. Allowing those two species or any of their hybrids to breed creates less resilient bass and weakens the overall stock.

After a heated debate, during which Meade gavelled down two other members of the commission, the board ultimately voted 4-3 to conduct a study whereby KDFWR would stock the lake with 5,000 F1 bass fingerlings annually for five years.

Less than 24 hours later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the lake, overruled the commission, telling Dreves in a letter reviewed by the Herald-Leader the federal government would not allow the state to stock non-native fish in its lake, as it violated the corp’s invasive species policy.

SPORTING GROUPS, BIOLOGISTS PLEDGE TO KEEP FIGHTING

Meade said he will not give up the fight to stock F1 bass in public waters, but biologists say they won’t, either.

Last year, KDFWR launched what it called a “Thoroughbred Bass” program, which seeks to

identify genetic markers in the brood stock that are likely to yield bigger, stronger northern largemouth. That population supports the agency’s statewide stocking efforts, and Western District fisheries biologist Adam Martin said he expects to begin introducing genetically superior fish later this year.

Meade called the program a “sham.” The intent, he added, was to “redirect the momentum that F1 was gaining.”

“Florida bass are already here,” said Jason Kinner, who heads up a nonprofit fishing and conservation group called Anglers for Improving Opportunities, which has spearheaded the fight for F1 bass in Kentucky. “The department is crying over spilled milk, but, we already spilled the milk.”

Diagnostic testing the department conducted to suss out the effect interbreeding has already had in Kentucky revealed more than 10% of bass in the commonwealth’s lakes already contain Florida bass characteristics, according to documents reviewed and verified by the Herald-Leader. More than 60% of bass tested in Harlan County’s Highsplint Lake had dominant or recessive Florida bass traits.

Biologists like Martin contend stocking on public or private property could exacerbate that problem. There is a narrow line somewhere near the Kentucky-Tennessee border, he said, beyond which Florida bass and their hybrid species cannot thrive.

“Do you think the fish know to stay in their own pond when it floods,” asked John Stepp, a teacher and founder of Eastern Outdoors Media, an Appalachian-focused outdoors media and entertainment brand. “Absolutely not.”

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