

Natural Waterbody Permits for Fish Farms

PUB-FH-060 2022

A 1997 state law requires fish farms operating in natural waterbodies to get a permit from the [Department of Natural Resources](#), as well as register their farm with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection ([DATCP](#)).

“New Initial” Permits: After January 1st 1998, farmers who plan to expand facilities into a natural waterbody must obtain an “initial” permit. These “initial” permits are strictly limited to freeze-out ponds.

Permit renewals: The DNR will usually renew your permit unless your fish farm has substantially impacted the public interest, or conditions surrounding your fish farm have changed relating to the legal requirements for eligibility (see page 2.)

What is a natural waterbody?

Wisconsin Administrative Code NR 19 defines a natural waterbody as “*any spring, stream, pond, lake or wetland that was historically present in a natural state but may have been physically altered over time.*” Examples of a natural waterbody include:

- Waters that are, or existed as, naturally occurring springs, ponds, or streams;
- Ponds constructed in natural springs, wetlands, streams, ponds, or lakes; and
- Ponds created by damming a stream.

If your pond was built in an area where there was no surface water or wetlands present, then you are not operating in a natural waterbody and do not need an NR 19 permit.

Are some waterbodies exempt?

If you received a [permit](#) under Wisconsin Statutes Chapter [30.19](#) (dredging, grading, or enlarging), [30.195\(a\)](#) (changing a stream course), or [31.04](#) (dams) or a wetland general or individual permit for construction of your pond, you do not need an NR 19 Natural Waterbody permit. Some examples are:

- Waterbodies authorized by a Chapter [31.04 dam](#) plan approval on non-navigable streams.
- Ponds constructed in wetlands, and approved with a DNR wetland [general](#) or [individual](#) permit.

If you are unsure if your pond is exempt from NR 19, we suggest you apply for a Natural Waterbody permit and attach a copy of your permit or certification to your application. If DNR determines you are exempt, we will refund your application fee with written confirmation of our determination.

What are the legal requirements to be eligible for an NR 19 permit?

Not all natural waterbodies may be used as fish farms. Before the DNR can issue an NR 19 permit for someone to use a natural waterbody as a fish

farm, all of the following five requirements of state law (s. 29.733, Stats.) must be met:

1. The land next to the waterbody must be owned, leased or controlled by owners of the fish farm.
2. There must be no public access to the waterbody except for fishing by the public for a fee.
3. No substantial public interest exists in the body of water.
4. No public or private rights in the body of water will be damaged.



5. **The waterbody must be one of the following:**

- A **freeze-out pond** defined as a natural, self-contained body of water in which freezing or anoxic conditions prevent the body of water from naturally sustaining a fish population at least twice every five years; or
- A **preexisting fish rearing facility** previously permitted by the DNR.

What about a “New Initial” Natural Waterbody Permit?

New fish farms in natural waterbodies (i.e. where the owner did not have a DNR private hatchery license on January 1, 1998) are strictly limited to freeze-out ponds. The statute defines freeze-out pond as “a natural, self-contained body of water in which freezing or anoxic conditions prevent the body of water from naturally sustaining a fish population at least twice every five years.”

People who want to operate a new fish farm in a freeze-out pond must obtain a New Initial Natural Waterbody permit from DNR. A non-refundable application fee of \$500 is required for the initial permit application, and an issued permit has no expiration date.

Applications for “new initial” NR 19 permits require DNR biologists to inspect the waterbody to determine if it is a freeze-out pond. In addition, DNR may issue the permit only if “no substantial public interest exists” in the body of water and “no public or private rights in the body of water will be damaged.”

What about renewing my permit?

The Bureau of Fisheries Management will mail reminder letters and renewal application packets to permit holders prior to expiration. The DNR will renew your permit unless our staff determines that your fish farm has substantially impacted the public interest. The permit renewal application fee is \$50. Permits renewed after August 16, 2012 have no expiration date.

What are the “public interests” considered in the decisions to grant or deny my NR 19 permit?

In Wisconsin, navigable lakes and streams are held in trust by the state for the public. This Public Trust Doctrine springs from the Wisconsin Constitution, and it protects citizen rights to use navigable waters for all the incidents of navigation. Navigable waters are defined by the Supreme Court as waters capable of floating a recreational craft of the shallowest draft on an annual, recurring basis such as during spring runoff.

Incidents of navigation include such uses as sailing, rowing, canoeing, bathing, fishing, hunting, skating, and other public purposes such as viewing natural scenic beauty.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has also held that the public's rights to water quality and quantity are protected in part to assure the protection of fish and wildlife including reptiles, amphibians and birds and their spawning, feeding and resting habitat.



great blue heron

How does the DNR determine if substantial public interests exist?

Once the department has received your permit application and the appropriate permit fee, DNR regional staff will inspect your fish farm to verify if the pond meets the legal requirements outlined above. In determining whether there are substantial public interests in the natural waterbody, the DNR is required to consider the following factors in accordance with state law ([NR 19.94](#) Wis. Adm. Code):

- Plant and wild animal habitat or plant and wild animal populations affected;
- [Threatened or endangered species](#) or their habitat present;
- Water quality related functional values or uses of wetlands identified in s. [NR 103.03](#) Wis. Adm. Code.
- Surface water quality standards identified in Ch NR [102](#), NR [104.02](#), NR [105](#), NR [106](#) and NR [107](#) and minimum water quantity requirements identified in s. [31.02, Stats.](#)
- The public's right to navigate and associated incidents to navigation.

What's the process?

Upon receipt of a complete permit application, the DNR will do a preliminary review for eligibility. If deemed eligible for a permit, the DNR will post the application (without tax ID information) on its public [website](#). The DNR will proceed on the application without a hearing if no substantive written objections to issuance of the permit are received within 30 days after publication or notice.

If you believe your fish farm might not be eligible for a Natural Waterbody permit, we suggest you contact the DNR immediately so we can explore alternatives. If you believe your fish farm meets all of these requirements, you should submit a permit application as soon as possible in order to comply with state laws.

What other DNR permits do I need?

Some fish farm operations may require other DNR environmental permits. Examples of some activities requiring permits are:

- Alterations in or near navigable waterways and wetlands;
- Dredging natural lakes and streams;
- Installing high capacity wells; and
- Discharging effluent from some fish farm facilities depending on fish production. For more information, see DNR Publication #FH-059, "[Environmental Permits for Fish Farms](#)".

How do I apply for a permit?

If your fish farm pond is a natural waterbody, and is not exempt as mentioned above, you need to complete a [Natural Waterbody Permit Application Form #3600-227](#). A separate permit is needed for each waterbody, unless the waterbodies are located on contiguous parcels of property under one ownership or leasehold, in which case one application may be used.

It may take some time for DNR to process your permit, so apply early and submit a complete application. To enable us to review your application quickly and thoroughly, please attach the following to the form:

- Location map, including cross streets, showing location of your project;
- Copy of deed, lease, land contract showing that you own or control all the land around the waterbody;
- Copy of the plat book and of any easements showing any public access to the fish farm;
- Diagram of the fish farm waterbody(s) showing dimensions of pond(s), raceways or tanks; and
- Copy of any DNR permit or approval for pond construction.
- For a new Initial NR 19 Permit – Documentation to show the natural waterbody is a "freeze-out pond.
- For a Transfer of NR 19 Permit – Photocopy of the previous owner's NR 19 permit, and documentation to show change of ownership.
- Photocopy of DATCP Fish Farm Registration from current or previous year.

To submit your application:

- ⇒ Enclose a \$50 fee for a "renewal" permit if your farm was previously permitted.
- ⇒ Enclose a \$100 fee for a "transfer" permit if recently purchased a farm with a Natural Waterbody permit.
- ⇒ Enclose a \$500 fee if you are applying for an "Initial" Natural Waterbody permit;
- ⇒ Mail or deliver the application to:
Bureau of Fisheries Management
–Natural Waterbody Permits
P.O. Box 7921
Madison, WI 53707-7921

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GETTING THE FORMS AND SUBMITTING YOUR NR 19 PERMIT APPLICATION

Application forms and more information are available on our website:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/fishing/aquaculture/naturalper.html>

or contact the DNR Fish Farm Environmental Permit Coordinator in your district of the state to obtain application materials.

Southern District: Columbia, Dane, Dodge, Fond du Lac, Grant, Green, Iowa, Jefferson, Kenosha, Lafayette, Ozaukee, Racine, Richland, Rock, Sauk, Sheboygan, Walworth, Washington, Waukesha counties

Tim Simonson
3911 Fish Hatchery Rd
Fitchburg, WI 53711
608-275-3239
timothy.simonson@wisconsin.gov

Eastern District: Brown, Calumet, Door, Green Lake, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Marquette, Menominee, Milwaukee, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano, Waupaca, Waushara, Winnebago counties

Dave Boyarski
110 S Neenah Ave
Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235
920-746-2865
david.boyarski@wisconsin.gov

Western District: Adams, Buffalo, Chippewa, Clark, Crawford, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson, Juneau, La Crosse, Marathon, Monroe, Pepin, Portage, Trempealeau, Vernon, Wood counties

Bob Hujik
1300 W Clairemont Ave
Eau Claire, WI 54701
715-839-3731
robert.hujik@wisconsin.gov

Northern District: Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Florence, Forest, Iron, Langlade, Lincoln, Oneida, Pierce, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, St. Croix, Taylor, Vilas, Washburn counties

Scott Toshner
10220 N State Highway 27S
Hayward, WI 54843
(715) 919-2007
Scott.Toshner@wisconsin.gov