

# Opening Day is Back

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The opening day of trout season is back! It was never really gone, but what is back is a single opening day for all of Pennsylvania. And, after two years of COVID-19-related adjustments to minimize crowding as trout enthusiasts took to the streams and lakes in the spring, it is clear that our anglers are looking forward to April 2.

For decades, the opening day of trout season statewide took place on the first Saturday after April 11. It was a time-tested tradition that many of us looked forward to each year. Few things rival the anticipation and excitement of opening day.

In 2007, in response to waters warming earlier in the southeastern part of Pennsylvania, opening day in 18 counties was moved up to the first Saturday after March 28—2 weeks before the statewide opener that remained the first Saturday after April 11. Opening day traditions continued, albeit on two different dates each year. Many people would take advantage of the two dates and fish both openers, at times resulting in complaints of overcrowding in some areas, particularly in those counties along the border of the two regions.

Then, COVID-19 hit. As the world grappled with the emerging realities of the pandemic in March 2020, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission was forced to figure out how to move over 3 million trout out of our state fish hatcheries as quickly as possible amid rapidly evolving travel and work restrictions that we feared may put a stop to the whole operation. At the same time, we were looking at the prospect of people standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the two opening days while everyone was learning the term "social distancing."

After extensive consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Governor's Office, we opened trout season on April 7, 2020, without advance notice. The purpose was to spread out the opening day pressure and keep people close to home—and it worked. While some were initially irked by the decision, most understood the rationale, and everyone was happy to be out on the water.

In late 2020, with COVID-19 still impacting many aspects of life, concerns continued to persist about the upcoming opening day crowds and travel. Remember, that was when kids were mostly learning remotely from home, we were watching sporting events from empty stadiums and arenas, and vaccines were only just starting to roll out.

So, in January 2021, again working with public health experts, our Board of Commissioners endorsed a single opening day to take place on April 3. Acting nearly 3 months in advance returned a level of predictability and normalcy to the opening



*Richie Williard with daughters Callie, age 6, and Kirah, age 11, while fishing Mahantango Creek, Schuylkill County, on opening day, 2021.*

day experience, and it gave people in most of Pennsylvania an extra 2 weeks of trout season.

An unintended and pleasant outcome of stocking earlier in 2020 was that our staff were able to get back to the hatcheries earlier to start working on the trout that anglers enjoyed in 2021. We received lots of compliments on the quality of the fish, which was helped by the extra time our staff had to work with them in the spring of 2020.

With two consecutive years of a single opening day under our belts, we took advantage of the opportunity to evaluate whether it was time to return to a single opening day statewide or maintain the pre-COVID-19 practice of two opening days. Staff thoroughly evaluated the options and settled on a recommendation to the Board of Commissioners to return to a single opening day. This was strongly supported by feedback from anglers in the field and through survey tools that clearly revealed a preference for a single opener.

In October, the Board voted to officially return to a single opening day of trout season to occur on the first Saturday in April every year. This year, that will be April 2. We will continue to offer the highly popular Mentored Youth Trout Day a week before opening day, which will also take place on a single day statewide and will be March 26 in 2022.

Returning to a single opening day on the first Saturday in April simplifies the regulations, minimizes confusion among new anglers, is easy to remember, reduces conflicts in border counties that existed under the dual opener model, allows our staff to get back to the hatcheries sooner to start working on the next generation of stocked trout, and lets businesses plan for the annual sales surge of gear and licenses.

But, the best part is that trout season will start 2 weeks earlier and open up additional fishing opportunities in most of Pennsylvania! At a time when residents and visitors to the Commonwealth continue to enjoy, discover, and, in some cases, rediscover the joys of fishing, who could argue with more time on the water?

On behalf of our Board and staff, thank you for your patience over the past two trout seasons as we made decisions and adapted in the best interest of public health.

We are happy to be able to restore predictability to the forthcoming and future trout seasons and set Pennsylvania on the course for generations of anglers to again keep their eyes on the calendar for that magical first Saturday in April.