

Project Category: Aquatic Education

Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation

Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools Program

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The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) extended its Aquatic Resources Education Program (AREP) into the schools through its own Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools (OKFITS) Program. While a “fishing in the schools” program is nothing new, the ODWC used the success of the Oklahoma National Archery in the Schools Program (OKNASP) to launch the program. With hundreds of schools participating in OKNASP the need for additional outdoor education curriculum for educators in the state was building. Educators were requesting more material, activities and resources to help introduce youth into the outdoors in the classroom.

With the AREP already developed the ODWC began to offer teachers the OKFITS program. The goal was to provide educators with the basic information and training needed to incorporate AREP into the classroom, and to provide them with basic supplies needed to accomplish this. A grant is provided to schools that have a certified educator on staff to cover 100% of the cost of the materials and supplies. A manual would also be developed to provide teachers with a curriculum to follow in the class room, but also provide students with educational literature.

To introduce this, the ODWC focused on the relationship with schools already involved with Outdoor Education through OKNASP. Teachers who were trained were then allowed to apply for a grant through the ODWC that would provide a kit of supplies. This kit consisted of standard materials needed to conduct a fishing clinic. In the kits were rods & reels, needle-nose pliers, line clippers, re-usable split shot weights, hooks, bobbers, hand towels and a tackle bag. Educational aids were also provided in the kit, which included laminated fish id posters, knot tying poster, knot tying kit and manuals. The grant agreement would require schools to incorporate the program in the class rooms, during school, at least once per school year for three years, which was the estimated useful life of the supplies provided. The cost of an individual kit is around \$450 to \$500, which is completely covered by the ODWC through Sportfish Restoration Funds.

A manual was produced in early 2014 and made available for the 2014-2015 school semesters to schools in the program. Printed copies were available at no cost to the school in a high quality magazine format and digitally online. The OKFITS manual included multiple chapters covering everything from basic information on sport fish identification, equipment, knot tying, casting, fisheries management, cooking, cleaning and publicized the involvement of Sport Fish Restoration funds.

The geographic range of the program includes the entire state, and any public or private school that has an educator who is interested in incorporating the OKFITS program into the classroom. This covers a wide range of demographics across the state, and is primarily hitting new users that are experiencing fishing for the first time.

The immediate response to the program, which was piloted in 2011, was a success, and currently Oklahoma has a little over 200 schools actively participating in the program with plans to introduce 50 more over the summer of 2015.

Educating more individuals on sport of fishing is a primary goal of the OKFITS Program. The ODWC in this process of creating the program has not had to hire more staff or increase man hours associated with the AREP. With professional educators now doing what was normally done by biologist, game wardens or education specialist across the state the Department has had the ability increase its promotion of sport fishing with less man power.

Prior to the introduction of the OKFITS Program the Department was annually educating a little more than 10,000 participants in the Aquatic Resources Education Program. This number has increase over the past few years with the introduction of the OKFITS Program, with almost 18,000 participants across the state in the 2014. With the expectation that this number will surpass 20,000 for the first time ever in 2015 based on new schools coming on board and starting to introduce the program.

The partnership the ODWC has created with schools and educators has continued to not only open up more Outdoor Education opportunities in the classroom, but also reach new schools as they continue to hear about the success this program. By the end of 2015 we expect to have over 250 schools actively participating in the program, and continue to see the number of students across the state who are learning about sport fishing in Oklahoma continue to increase.

For a copy of the Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools can be view here:

http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/education/fitsdocs/okfits_manual_may2014.pdf

Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools link:

<http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/education/fits.htm>