

Best Practices in Handling Freshwater Fish

SEAFOOD, ESPECIALLY FINFISH, SPOILS VERY QUICKLY AFTER HARVEST. A variety of finfish are harvested from Louisiana waters, and the majority are on ice and unfrozen. Improve the quality of your catch, and your bottom line, by following these handling practices that capture a superior, “just-caught” flavor.



HARVEST AND HANDLING

The primary goal is to unload your catch so that the seafood is not only in good condition, but that it has many days of high quality shelf life remaining. The first step is to start out with a clean boat each trip that is free of oil, trash and other debris.

After fish are caught, bacteria and chemical changes will begin to break down the flesh of the fish. This process cannot be stopped, but it can be slowed by rapid chilling, careful handling to prevent physical damage, and thorough cleaning to limit contamination.

Rough handling of fish can cause bruising, scale loss and worse, an entry point for bacteria that speeds up the decay process.

Use care when landing and sorting to limit this physical damage, and sort the catch quickly in the shade to help keep fish from getting too hot.

Ideally, finfish should be rinsed thoroughly to remove dirt, slime, and excess surface bacteria. If this is not possible on the boat then it should be done at the dock before transport.



CHILLING

The very best practice to improve fish quality is to ice your catch as soon as it comes out of the water. Though many freshwater boats are not equipped to handle fish in ice, experts at Louisiana Sea Grant strongly recommend this one practice for safety and quality.

At the very least, finfish should be iced immediately after unloading. Combine the steps of washing and chilling to take the initial heat out of the fish, and remove bacteria using slush ice. Use a bin filled with a slurry of ice and fresh water (2 parts ice to 1 part water), and be sure to change the wash water when it becomes noticeably discolored.

Even using slush ice, there are risks to fish quality that include overcrowded washing bins and tanks, and continued use of dirty wash water.



STORAGE & TRANSPORT

Fish should be packed neatly in ice, belly-down on the bottom layer and belly-up thereafter. When possible, the ice should completely cover the fish at each level. Two pounds of ice should be used for every one pound of fish.

All totes should be equipped with drainage holes, especially if they are stacked. Iced fish are best held at an air temperature of 32° to 40°F, where ice is able to melt and can trickle down through the stacked crates to wash fish and keep them moist. While in storage, fish core temperature should be kept around 34°F to hold off spoilage and extend shelf life.

When putting them in refrigeration, separate fish that are severely damaged and store them separately so as not to spread contamination. This also ensures that your top buyers get only your top quality catch. Also, keep in mind that fish that are still bent should not be straightened out, as this will lead to a separation of the muscle bands in the flesh and later reduce the quality of the filet.

Fish that are frozen should be dipped, after freezing, into cold water to form a glaze on the outside of the fish to protect against dehydration and freezer burn in the frozen storage hold and after unloading.

