

Manage Beaver Problems in Mississippi



The beaver is a large aquatic rodent (25 to 75 pounds in weight) with a flat, scaly tail and webbed hind feet. Beavers eat aquatic plants and the bark, leaves, and twigs of many trees and shrubs. They will live nearly anywhere that has enough food and a permanent water supply, including lakes, rivers, creeks, ponds, or springs. Beavers commonly build dams to flood areas so they can get to food and hide from predators.

The beaver was once an important and valuable resource in Mississippi and the Southeast because of demand for its pelt; however, with falling pelt prices, a higher human population, and more forestry, most people now regard beavers as a nuisance instead of a valuable furbearer.

The Problems

Flooding caused by beaver dams can damage timber, agricultural crops, homes and other structures, roadways, and ornamental or garden plants. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that beavers annually cause about \$100 million in damage to public and private property in the Southeast.

- **Timber**—Using their large, continuously growing teeth, beavers will gnaw bark around the base of a tree for food and sometimes fell the tree. The tree dies which causes a financial loss for the timber owner. This loss can be significant, particularly if high-grade hardwood trees are damaged. More importantly, beaver dams can cause flooding over large areas of timberland. If water is not quickly drained, trees will die and become unmarketable. Also, this flooding may make timber more prone to rot and disease. One beaver dam can flood and destroy thousands of acres of timber.
- **Agriculture**—Flooding caused by beaver dams can also destroy agricultural crops. The flat areas throughout many of the important agricultural regions of Mississippi allow beaver dams to flood significant acreage of cropland. This flooding often makes parts of the field inaccessible to farm equipment. Sometimes beavers enter crop fields, cut the plants, and use them for food or dam-building material.

- **Homes and Other Buildings**—In situations where beavers and humans both live, floodwater can cause significant damage to human homes or other structures. In some instances, entire subdivisions or neighborhoods have suffered water damage. Occasionally, beavers may cause direct damage to wooden structures, such as backyard decks, by gnawing on the wood, and thus cause appearance and structural problems.
- **Roadways**—A significant but often overlooked consequence of beaver dams is damage to public roadways. Water drainage ditches on the edges of roadways offer good habitat for beavers. Dams can flood the road or, in some instances, damage the road itself through erosion. Beaver dams and the flooding they cause have resulted in roads being closed, bridges and culverts requiring replacement, and occasional car accidents.
- **Water Control**—Beavers can obstruct water control devices and damage structures by burrowing. Irrigation canals and drains often are plugged by beavers and must be cleared. Beavers can cause water control structures, often used for temporary flooding to create waterfowl habitat, to be useless. Pond owners should be particularly watchful because beavers can cause substantial damage to pond dams by burrowing into them.
- **Ornamental Plants**—Finally, the natural feeding behavior of beavers can damage ornamental trees, shrubs, and other plants. For homeowners, urban park managers, and commercial landscapers, damage to ornamental plants can be a frustrating and costly problem. When such areas are next to beaver habitat, damage is almost certain to occur unless control measures are implemented.

Effective Solutions

In Mississippi, people are allowed to control beavers without a license or permit on their own property. Listed below are effective and legal techniques to manage beavers and the damage they cause.

- **Trapping**—Perhaps the most common, effective, and affordable of all beaver control techniques is traps. Typically, trapping that kills beavers is the only method that is both effective and affordable. This is the only trapping practice we recommend. For trapping to be effective, it should be done by someone familiar with trapping techniques. A skilled trapper can remove all of the beavers in a pond in just a few days, but an untrained trapper may spend weeks or months and not catch a single beaver. Many different types of traps and trapping techniques can be effective in catching beavers. Of all the traps used, the Conibear type (#330) is perhaps the most common and most effective. The Conibear trap is a metal body-gripping trap that kills the beavers almost instantly. Other trapping options include foothold traps, snares, and basket/suitcase-type traps. Usually only professional wildlife managers use the basket/suitcase type.
- **Dam Removal**—Once you have removed beavers from an area, it is usually necessary to remove the dam and drain water from the flooded area. Many techniques are available to remove dams. For most people, rakes, shovels, or other hand tools are the most practical method, but this can be difficult and time consuming. Mechanized equipment, such as backhoes, can be used to remove dams, but sometimes you cannot get to beaver dams with this equipment. Explosives also can be an effective way to remove dams, but these should only be used by those with proper certification and extensive knowledge of their use, danger, and risks.

- **Exclusion**—It is nearly impossible and very expensive to keep beavers away from rivers, ponds, lakes, or other large areas of good habitat. However, it is possible and practical to keep them away from small areas or, more commonly, from individual trees or shrubs. An effective technique is to surround individual trees or shrubs with hardware cloth, woven wire, or another metal barrier at least 4 feet high.
- **Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler**—Research has shown that beavers like to build dams by the sound of running water. The Clemson beaver pond leveler exploits this behavior by using a pipe located under the surface of the water and through the dam, which eliminates the sound of running water. Because the beavers cannot hear running water, they do not attempt to plug the pipe. The Clemson beaver pond leveler lets you temporarily change water levels in beaver ponds to manage waterfowl and for other environmental or appearance purposes.
- **Shooting**—Shooting can sometimes be effective in removing problem beavers or in special situations on private land; however, when there is a large number of beavers or the problems are widespread, shooting is rarely effective. To be effective, you must be a very accurate shooter. In most cases, trapping will be much better to manage beaver problems. If you decide to use shooting to remove problem beavers, contact your local conservation officer with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks to inform him/her of your plans and ask about specific legal restrictions.

Getting Help

Wildlife Services (WS), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, helps ease wildlife damage to agriculture, urban, and natural resources. WS also addresses wildlife threats to public health and safety and protects endangered and threatened species from predators. In Mississippi, WS oversees the Beaver Control Assistance Program. This program helps landowners, county road and state highway managers, and other entities solve problems created by beavers.

WS employs individuals with special training in wildlife damage management, particularly beaver control. These wildlife specialists visit sites by request, consult with the landowner, and offer solutions. Wildlife specialists offer free help to people who may want to try to solve problems on their own, or landowners may choose to pay a specialist to remove beavers and any dams that may be impounding water. Each specialist provides a free estimate of the work he/she feels needs to be done, and the landowner can decide whether to use WS or find other sources for work needing to be done. For more information about WS and their programs, contact the Mississippi office at (662) 325-3014.

In addition to WS, private contractors and trappers may be able to help control beaver damage on private property. See your local phonebook for listings.

Information Sheet 1655 (POD-01-20)

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Produced by Agricultural Communications.

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director