



Photo courtesy of B.A.S.S.

Live-action son

It's easy to dismiss when non-anglers look at all the fancy gear, tackle, and technology available to modern fishermen and say something silly like, "that's not very fair," or "the fish don't have a chance." These people don't have my life experience of going out in a \$100,000 bass boat that is brimming with state-of-the-art electronics and loaded to the gills with the latest rods, reels, braided super lines and lures, only to be routinely and soundly humiliated by an aquatic animal with a brain the size of a pea.

Tournament restrictions target its effectiveness

When the professional bass fishing industry makes moves that pump the brakes on technology, however, that is unexpected and worthy of notice. That is precisely what happened in fall 2024, as the National Professional Fishing League (NPFL), Major League Fishing (MLF), and the granddaddy of them all, Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) announced a variety of restrictions on the use of popular live-action sonar units and LCD displays aboard competitors' boats.

The restrictions slated to begin with the 2025 fishing season range in their severity and application but share some common intentions. In essence, these organizations are exploring ways to level the playing field and make success more about acquired angling skills and less about the amount of sonar technology on a competitor's boat. Perhaps they are trying to make fishing great again (there, I said it).

Why all the fuss?

The simplified explanation is that live action sonar technology works like a medical sonogram, letting anglers electronically view the water column and "see" fish actually moving on the display in nearly real time. More importantly, they can see fish in all directions around the boat based on the type or number of transducers in use. This technology's effectiveness—especially in the hands of experienced bass anglers—created a situation where competitive anglers had to join in or be left behind. It has also had the side effect of creating a generation of young, up-and-coming bass anglers who can't grasp the idea of having to fish without this electronic data at their disposal.

This type of live-action sonar has only been around about six years, but it has already created quite a storm in the competitive fishing world. Garmin lit the bass-fishing technology fuse with its LiveScope system, now in its third or fourth generation and expanding into new fishing markets based on sales success and popularity. Lowrance unveiled its ActiveTarget live sonar in 2020, and it quickly became popular with MLF pros and other competitive anglers. Rapid success led to enhanced second-generation technology and a series of new HDS PRO chartplotter/fishfinder displays ideal for providing multiple simultaneous sonar views.

Humminbird, another key player, launched its Mega Live Imaging technology in 2021 and now has across-the-board compatibility with all APEX and SOLIX MFD models and HELIX 8-12 GN3 and HELIX 7-15 G4N MFD models. The company also provides ways to integrate

this technology with its popular Minn Kota Ultrex or Fortrex trolling motors with Mega Imaging capabilities built in.

These technologies proved immediately successful and immensely popular. Tournament bass anglers have always looked for an edge in what is an extremely competitive sport. And recreational fishermen are particularly keen to emulate their favorite pros and are loyal to their gear and equipment of choice. It's the reason why top pros' jerseys are completely covered with logos of boat builders, outboard makers, tackle manufacturers, sunglass companies, and of course, electronics brands.

But even as live sonar technology was expanding and growing in popularity, there were some in the bass fishing community who quietly wondered if we were taking their beloved sport down a slippery slope. Over time, those voices have become louder, resulting in a sudden and surprising shift.

Restrictions on the horizon

Of the two major circuits, B.A.S.S. went first, announcing on Sept. 4 new "technology standardization practices" for its 2025 Bassmaster Elite Series and Bass Pro Shops Bassmaster Classic presented by Jockey Outdoors events. Live action sonar isn't banned, per se, but there will be limits on its use during practice and competitions. The new rules limit the number of live sonar transducers to one, and it must be mounted to the trolling motor on the front of the boat. Before this, there were no restrictions on the number of transducers and where they were mounted on the boat, turning some competitors' boats into floating "omni sonar" systems.

To address this, B.A.S.S. will provide competitors with a list of acceptable live transducers from the primary electronics manufacturers, and any equipment not on the list will be prohibited. In addition to limiting the number of transducers and their location, B.A.S.S. will be restricting the total size of LCD displays permitted onboard competitors' boats to 55 inches total, including bow and dash displays. B.A.S.S. stated in a news release that the trend of placing more and larger screens around the boat has become a safety concern by creating blind spots that could interfere with safe boat operation.

It's hard to argue that point when you look at recent photos of professional bass fishing rigs—their bows festooned with sports-bar-worthy arrays of large LCD screens. And while I'm not a big fan of nanny state mentality, it's not hard to imagine how these large displays could interfere with an angler's forward vision when driving. B.A.S.S. believes that limiting the aggregate screen size in this way will help address this problem.

No limits in lower ranks

B.A.S.S. has many levels of sanctioned competitions that allow anglers to compete against peers and, if successful, advance to higher levels of competition. These include B.A.S.S. Opens, B.A.S.S. Nation Tournaments, and even college and high school circuits. It's important to note that these new restrictions for the 2025 season apply only to the Bassmaster Elite Series events and the Bassmaster Classic—so anglers in these other categories can use live sonar without restriction.

It's a new landscape where anglers can use the technology without limits in the lower ranks but may have to adjust as they move up the ranks and compete against more experienced fishermen. "The use of live sonar at the Elite Series level has sparked tremendous debate," said B.A.S.S. CEO Chase Anderson. "Our technology committee spent a tremendous amount of time reviewing post-event surveys, comparing equipment on Elite Series boats to success rates and considering both fan engagement and bass community feedback related to the use of new technology. Our goal was to ensure a level playing field that both embraces the value of hard work and experience on the water as well as new technologies that will continue to improve angler success."

A week after the announcement by B.A.S.S., MLF announced its live sonar rules changes for the 2025 fishing season. MLF events are a somewhat different

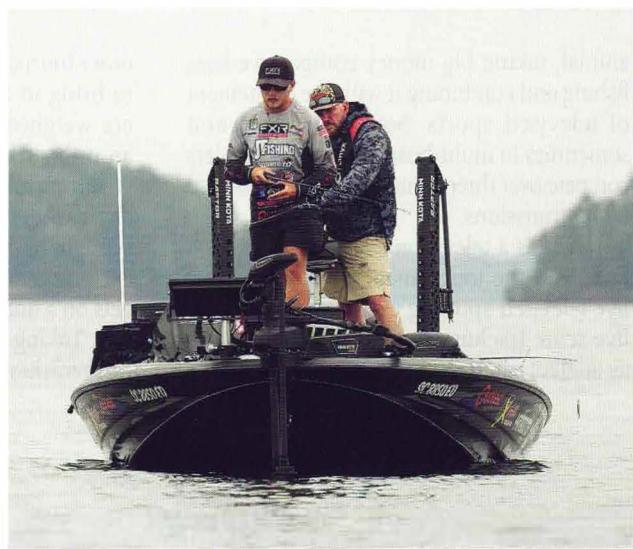


Photo courtesy of B.A.S.S.



Photo courtesy of Garmin



Photo courtesy of B.A.S.S.

Chief concerns expressed by tournament operators are that live-action sonar technology gives users an unfair edge that puts electronics ahead of angling skills and that multiple displays perched in front of the driver create unsafe vessel operating conditions. All three major tournaments announced restrictions of some sort on the use of the technology.

animal, taking big-money competitive bass fishing and combining it with the excitement of televised sports. Sometimes solo and sometimes in multi-boat team events, anglers compete over three fishing “periods” separated by intermissions.

There is a television camera aboard each boat, and the tournament is presented as a live televised sporting event, complete with live score tracking and continuous updates as anglers catch and weigh fish. And unlike

other tournaments where anglers fish all day to bring in the heaviest five fish limit, fish are weighed and released immediately by an onboard judge. Anglers can catch and weigh as many fish as possible during the day, as they’re not limited to the five fish being brought to the scale. This can make for some exciting comebacks when an angler suddenly gets on a hot streak and can pile up fish after fish. Taking the sporting event analogy even further, they even have a 2-minute “penalty

box” if the angler drops a fish on the deck between bringing it aboard and putting it on the scale.

MLF has tailored its live-action sonar restrictions to make sense with its style of fishing competition. Boats will be limited to two forward facing or 360-degree sonar transducers in any combination. While it isn’t capping cumulative screen size like B.A.S.S., MLF is adding a rule that no bow-mounted screen may extend vertically more than 18 inches off the surface of the front deck at its highest point when the boat is on plane. Additionally, no screen mounted at the console may extend vertically more than 16 inches off the top of the steering column where it protrudes from the console.

Different approaches

Here is where the philosophies diverge. Pros competing on MLF’s 2025 Pro Bass Tour will be allowed to use forward-facing sonar and 360-degree sonar for only one of the three periods each day. Anglers will declare their use of the technologies before the start of their period of choice, and fans watching on MLFNOW! will see an indicator on Scoretracker next to each angler’s name. This will let viewers/fans know who is currently using the technology, who has used it already, and who still has it available to them. This rule will apply to all seven regular season Bass Pro Tour stages and Redcrest 2025 (MLF’s championship event). With its tournament day broken into time periods and an official in every boat, MLF is uniquely positioned to govern and enforce usage of sonar technology during these top-level tournaments.

With this approach, MLF is making live sonar use part of an angler’s overall strategy for the day. Anglers might use it to jump out to a hot start and build a big lead, or perhaps it will be more important in the middle of the day when the sun’s bright and the fish have gone deep. Or perhaps it’s smarter to save the technological advantage for the final period, to make a big charge to the finish. Whatever route an angler chooses, it seems MLF’s approach has found a way to make the choice another interesting twist to the competition.

In MLF’s Tackle Warehouse Invitationals, qualifying days will be split with live-action sonar allowed on Day 1 and prohibited on Day 2. Anglers who advance to the Championship Round will be allowed to use the technology on Day 3. Forward facing and 360-degree transducers must be covered with a high-vis cap (provided by MLF) that will prohibit sonar transmission when its use is not allowed.

There will be no restrictions in the MLF General Tire Heavy Hitters or General Tire Team Series, where anglers compete out of similarly equipped, league-provided boats. There are also no live and 360-degree sonar restrictions during practice for any MLF series. At this time, MLF's Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League and Abu Garcia College Fishing anglers will be allowed to use forward-facing and 360-degree sonar without restriction during practice and all competition days.

"Forward-facing sonar is the most effective bass fishing technology that I've seen introduced in my lifetime," said Boyd Duckett, President and CEO of MLF. "It's a powerful tool that provides an opportunity to access and catch fish that we've never been able to efficiently target before. However, its effectiveness is leading to a more uniform approach in tournaments. For the sport to remain engaging to fans, participants, or sponsors, it's important that anglers can still compete using a diverse range of techniques," Duckett added.

No technology arms race

The National Professional Fishing League (NPFL) has taken a more hardline approach to the issue of live forward-facing sonar, announcing it will prohibit the use of this technology during official practice and competition. In an article published online by NPFL President Brad Fuller, the organization drew comparisons to Major League Baseball prohibiting aluminum bats, engine restrictions in auto racing, or the Professional Golfers Association excluding balls that use technology to compensate for shortcomings of skill.

"We do not want competitive bass fishing to become a technology arms race where anglers stare at a screen, targeting pixels and losing their connection to the fish we love so much. Forward-facing live sonar is changing the ways that anglers approach competition and the ways that fans consume content. It's also reducing the methods and baits that anglers use to compete. Robust competition requires variety, experience, and broad skills. It must be more than an expensive video game," said Fuller.

A common goal

While there are many different approaches, there is generally a common goal—shifting the focus away from electronic technology and back onto old-fashioned "fish sense." Things like the ability to read the water and predict fish behavior based on weather, water conditions, seasonal considerations like spawning times or metabolic fluctuations,



Photo courtesy of Lowrance



Tournament operators are taking different approaches to their live-action sonar restrictions. On the list are limitations on the number and vertical installed height of displays and on cumulative screen size of all such monitors, when live-action sonars can and can't be used, as well as limits on the number, location and type of transducers.

or the availability of forage. Then, to apply that knowledge and devise the best tackle, techniques, and presentations to score in those conditions. These are the very learned skills that seasoned bass fishermen would earn and fine tune over many years on the water and could usually be counted on to set the best fishermen apart from the field.

While these competitive bass fishing restrictions are designed to provide access to the benefits of this technology and simultaneously manage their use, they will undoubtedly cause ripple effects across the fishing and boating industries. Marine electronics manufacturers are important sponsors of professional bass fishing circuits as well as individual anglers, ranging from high school and college fishing teams to championship level pros battling for millions in prize money. Manufacturers value these relationships and do an excellent job of promoting their professional anglers to customers, connecting the use of their equipment with a successful angler's winning ways.

Sponsorship money and other support from the marine electronics industry also helps

make tournament fishing possible, something event organizers must have grappled with when formulating these regulations. And as these restrictions have yet to take effect at the time of this writing, the tournament fishing business and marine electronics industry are waiting like everybody else to see exactly how this all shakes out.

When asked if regulations were likely to spread into more bass fishing competitions, Garmin's Senior Director of Marine and RV Sales David Dunn predicted a wait and see approach. "We anticipate other tournament trails, particularly those at local and regional levels, will wait to see how the upcoming season goes. There are still a lot of unknowns including what, if any, implications there will be to anglers with the new restrictions that have been set in place by the national organizations," said Dunn.

"We had limited prior knowledge of these changes, so I'm not sure of what the future holds," said Jeremiah Clark, Vice President/General Manager of Fishing Systems for Navico Group. "I believe that if we as an industry can

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enhance the excitement and educational value of live streaming and package content around the use of live sonar, it could address one of the main objections to their use on boats during competitions."

And there are some on both the fishing and industry sides of the aisle who feel live sonar technology is being unfairly scapegoated. "I believe the industry (including electronics manufacturers, anglers, content providers and shows) made an error by referring to forward-facing sonar as 'video game fishing,'" added Clark. "Live sonar is a tool that requires skill to master. Anglers who have learned to use it effectively have seen success, while others have not, similarly to various baits and fishing techniques throughout the sport's history."

Top professional angler Edwin Evers supported this position in a 2024 article published on the MLF website. "I look at forward-facing sonar as another tool in my toolbox, another weapon in an angler's arsenal that I can pull out when the situation calls for it and put away when it's not right for the situation." He even cautions that he has been hurt in major tournaments by relying on his Lowrance ActiveTarget sonar too much while letting himself become distracted from other opportunities. "These changes provide us and the industry with a unique opportunity to promote live sonar and forward-facing sonar as the tool that it is, rather than a device that magically attracts fish," added Navico's Clark.

Where do we go from here?

Has live sonar technology made bass fishing "over easy"—a cheat code for professionals and everyday anglers to instant success? Has the industry developed technology to the point where traditional fishing skills are eroding? Will these rule changes trickle down through competitive fishing and eventually alter how regular anglers feel about it? There are many questions and not so many answers, at least not yet. Some facts seem clear, among them that live forward facing sonar isn't going away.

It's extremely popular, and with so many anglers accustomed to this technology (and so many boats already equipped), we can't put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Additionally, electronics manufacturers have no plans to slow down their innovation on this front. "While we are aware of the restrictions, they will not hinder our drive for innovation and to deliver superior products to our customers," said Dunn. "Weekend warriors and recreational anglers don't have these restrictions, so we don't anticipate this will impact sales to those customers, who still want to have the best equipment available to them on the water."

It's uncertain where this road is going to lead, especially when it comes to how manufacturers will work with sponsored professionals and how they might market their products to consumers. They could focus more on tournament circuits where there are no limits on sonar use. They might leverage the fact that this technology is so effective, it's made fishing too easy for top-level professionals. These evolving restrictions—particularly those around maximum total display size, display location and the quantity and mounting location of sonar transducers—could even affect the development of new live sonar systems and accessories in the future. Nobody is going on record to say that, but given the current situation and the possibility of more regulations in the future, it wouldn't come as a surprise.