

The AFTMA Fly Line Standards

We don't need a new system - we need to put the old one into practice.

I've been involved with fishing of some sort or another for several decades now. During that time I've had the opportunity to speak to thousands of fishermen and rod builders from around the world. It dawned on me long ago that perhaps the most misunderstood segment of the tackle market concerns the numbering system used for fly rods and fly lines. Most fishermen, and many rod builders, have never really understood it. For those of you who don't understand what these numbers mean, let's take a quick look.

Fly rods are no different than spinning or casting rods in that they require some manner of weight and some amount of angler input in order to load and cast. In fly fishing, you cast the line, not a lure or sinker. Depending upon the fly you're casting and the fishing situation you're in, you may need to cast lines of varying weights. Thus, a system was devised to properly match these various weight lines to the rods that would best cast them. This system consists of a set of numbers ranging from 1 to 15, with each number assigned to represent a specific amount of weight (in grains). But unlike a sinker or lure that has a fixed weight, the weight of a fly line will vary depending upon how much of it you have past the tip. So AFTMA had to arrive at a constant length of line from which to take their weight measurements. They settled on measuring the weight of the first 30 feet of line. At that point, it became a simple task to design specific rods that would work best with 30 feet of any specific line past the rod tip.

Let's use an AFTMA 5-weight line for an example. The standard for the first 30 feet of a 5-weight line is 145 grains. Thus, a 5-weight rod should fully load with 30 feet of such a line past the tip. Now because any rod will cast with a bit under, or over, the optimum casting weight, the fisherman can expect that his 5-weight rod will still cast fairly well even with a bit less or a bit more than 30 feet of that 5-weight line past the tip. Remember, however, that when he has less than 30 feet of line past the tip he has less than 145 grains to cast with. And when he has more than 30 of line past the tip, he has more than 145 grains for casting. But as long as he doesn't go too far in either direction, he'll be okay. In fact, he's most likely to find that his matched 5-weight outfit will cast and fish nicely at distances of from about 25 to 65 or 70 feet. And that's a pretty good overall range for most fishing situations.

Now what happens if he decides to fish in really close - maybe a small stream where he'll never get more than maybe 15 feet of line past the rod tip? Not a problem. He still needs 145 grains or so to get that rod to load. He obtains that 145 grains on 15 feet of line by moving up a line number or two. So instead of a 5-weight line, he selects a 6-weight line for use when he's fishing in really close. The rod still feels 145 grains, so it casts fine.

Now let's move out to the far end of the spectrum. Let's say the guy is going to be fishing at very long distances and pushing perhaps 80 to 100 feet. He may well carry 50 or 60 or more feet of line past the tip before his final cast. He still needs 145 grains on that rod and our 5-weight line at 60 or more feet is going to weigh much more than that. But again, it's not a problem, as he can just drop down a line size to a 4-weight line and find that with around 50 to 60 feet of line out there past the tip, he's wound up right back at 145 grains. Perfect.

This is and was always the premise of the AFTMA line numbering system. Lines and rods of the same number were designed to match and work well together with about 30 feet of the rated line past the tip. If you were fishing in really close, you moved up a line size. If you were fishing out really, really far, you dropped down a line size. What could be simpler? Nothing, really.

But when one company rates a rod for 20 feet of line past the tip, and another rates a similar rod for 40 feet past the tip, well... you see the problem. We don't even have any consistency among the makers themselves. Many rate their 4-weight rods differently than their 8 weight rods. Or their shorter rods differently than their longer rods. There simply is no single standard in use across the board.

There's a lot of talk these days about creating a new standard for fly lines and fly rods, something that might eliminate the confusion which we have now. But there's really no need for it. The original AFTMA system made, and still makes, perfect sense. But you have to understand what it's based on - 30 feet of line weighing a certain amount and a rod intended to optimally load with that particular weight. Once you understand that, you can correctly match that rod with any line at any distance or situation you plan to fish. We don't need a new system, we need to understand the original AFTMA system. It's simple and it works. Let's use it. 🎣