

Pooling Resources

By Ron Wilson

It's long been said from both sides of the fence that the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is the nationwide hatchery system's best partner.

It's spring, and you can't swing a paddlefish by its rostrum without interrupting something of importance at Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery.

Walleye eggs rise and fall, swapping positions in large glass containers, while northern pike no bigger than pencil shavings swim in metal troughs, their halfway house for the time being.

A biologist hunches over a microscope in one building to check the vitality of eggs squeezed from spawning walleye, while another ushers rainbow trout into sort of a fish fun ride that hums with efficiency. The contraption sucks trout from a concrete raceway, and shoots them into fish-hauling tanks. By days end, they'll be released into a lake in northwestern North Dakota.

In another raceway near the trout, paddlefish brood stock bigger than kindergartners swim lazy laps. Some carry whitish scars atop their backs from close encounters with boat props. Ingredients – milt and eggs – for future generations of paddlefish will be taken from these ancient creatures, which are scheduled to be released back into the wild sometime this summer.

Thousands of chinook salmon longer than your ring finger zip about holding tanks as if there's so much to do and so little time to do it. In reality, that's pretty true, as these fish came to the hatchery last fall as eggs, and some will spawn and die in just a few short years.

Outdoors, the tiny pike are stocked in rearing ponds, eating tiny zooplankton and occasionally one another. In a month or less, they grow to about 2 inches, and are then planted in state waters. Walleye will follow the pike, inhabiting the rearing ponds for 40-45 days before being stocked elsewhere.

What likely goes unnoticed by pedestrians visiting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facility is the cooperative effort between state and federal agencies. It's long been said from both sides of the fence that the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is the nationwide hatchery system's best partner. What goes on there is matchless.

"Most states have federal and state hatcheries with different marching orders ... it's

like they live in two different worlds," said Greg Power, Department fisheries division chief. "It's not like that here. It's a combination of a strong tradition of working together, but it also has a lot to do with the outstanding personnel who have gone through the hatchery. We have a shared work ethic and vision of what the state's fishery should look like."

The marriage works for a number of reasons, including the expertise both agencies bring to the water each day. Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production/development section supervisor, said state biologists provide the know-how in egg-collecting, fish-hauling and an intimate knowledge of North Dakota waters. Conversely, the hatchery has disease experts and the wisdom of raising fish.

Like in some marriages, there is the issue of money. In this instance, however, it isn't a divisive matter. This year the Game and Fish Department will pay about \$220,000 in total to Garrison Dam and Valley City national fish hatcheries. "We'll also pay the lion's share of costs for enhancements, too, especially if they have to do with the salmon building or the rearing ponds we paid for," Power said.

Twenty years ago, ground was broke at Garrison Dam to expand hatchery facilities to meet increased fishing interest in North Dakota. State fisheries managers were requesting far more fish than the existing facilities were able to produce. The fix was a building where more trout and salmon could be raised and 40 new rearing ponds for pike and walleye.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funding wasn't available for the hatchery expansion, so the bill was picked up by the Game and Fish Department. The building itself was completed in 1988 at \$1.5 million.

In 1988-89, salmon and trout production more than doubled in the new facility as compared to the old. The first 10 new rearing ponds were available in 1989, leading to a record year for production at Garrison Dam with 4.4 million walleye fingerlings and 2.7 million northern fingerlings.

It was, and continues to be, money well spent, as the fishing industry in North

The working relationship between state and federal employees at Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery is to be envied. Here, Jerry Weigel, Game and Fish, and Rob Holm, hatchery manager, trim a too-long pipe.

Dakota generates hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Power once wrote: "Although fisheries are highly dynamic, there were two major events during the past 10-20 years that have dramatically transformed the fishing landscape of North Dakota. These two events are historic climatic changes and an increase in hatchery production."

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Historically, the Fish and Wildlife Service's responsibility was recreational fishing, said Rob Holm, USFWS hatchery manager. "But more recently it's been more toward maintaining and restoring native fish, which offends a lot of our partners," he said. "At this hatchery, we are not ready to abandon ship on recreational fishing. Half of my funding comes from the state, so we see recreational fishing as high priority as work with (endangered) pallid sturgeon."

Holm is quick to note, however, that some of the federal funding the hatchery received to work with pallid sturgeon was also a boon for North Dakota's game fish. "It was a win-win for all as the money was used on infrastructure for endangered fish, but it also benefited sport fish," he said. "People need to remember that we can manage both."

The slice of annual federal funding Garrison Dam and Valley City receive is paper thin. Five years ago Holm said he couldn't turn the lights on at the hatchery without Game and Fish funding. While things have gotten somewhat better, the analogy remains the same. "I haven't bought a truck, ever, for the facility," he said. "Eventually, I hope to have enough money to do that."

The fish biology at Garrison Dam many times becomes a sideline, Holm admits, as the hatchery has been without a maintenance



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CRAIG BIHRLE

person for a decade. The hatchery's saving grace is three biologists who have maintenance skills, as they often find themselves playing plumber, carpenter and electrician. "They're the reason this place looks good," he said.

Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, Weigel believes, raises walleye fingerlings cheaper than any of the facilities he's been to around the country. "With almost 100 acres of production ponds available, combined with the fact that walleye do so well there, the production potential is in the top in the nation, if not the top," he said. "There are facilities out there with more people, but they don't match the production of these guys at Garrison Dam. Since the completion of the hatchery expansion, more than 112 million walleye fingerlings have been shipped from Garrison Dam."

The face of fishing in North Dakota would be unrecognizable without Garrison Dam and Valley City hatcheries. You could certainly say goodbye to trout and salmon fishing in the state, and your favorite walleye lake would hold fewer fish most years. "In North Dakota, we'd love to have 100 percent self-sustaining fish populations, but we don't," Power said. "The hatcheries are critical to our state."

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Historically, Power said, the Devils Lake walleye fishery was sustained almost entirely by hatchery-raised fish, the lower third of Lake Sakakawea has been stocked repeatedly, and the majority of the state's smaller waters have received their share of fingerlings.

Hatchery-raised fish have certainly taken the potential lows out of many fisheries during low-water years when chances of successful natural reproduction were slim.

Jerry Tishmack, Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery biologist, weighs walleye fingerlings destined for North Dakota waters.

“Think about not having the ability to get fish from the hatcheries during drought years,” Weigel said. “We would have to wait on Mother Nature to replenish the fish. In the meantime, there would be years of very poor fishing.”

And some waters just aren’t conducive to good natural reproduction, no matter the climatic conditions. “Because of the high variability of reproductive success, it’s so up and down, the hatcheries let us smooth out the lows,” Weigel said.

The hatcheries are also to be applauded for fueling waters with fish other than walleye and northern pike. Smallmouth bass, for example, are self-sustaining now, but without the hatchery, Power said, they would not have gotten a start.

“If you don’t appreciate what the hatcheries have done for North Dakota, then it’s likely you don’t fish,” Power said.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Northern pike no bigger than pencil shavings are dumped into hatchery rearing ponds this spring.



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Fish Numbers

In 2006, more than 10 million fish, 73,000 pounds, were stocked from Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery and 3.28 million from Valley City National Fish Hatchery.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s 2007 request looks like this: 160,000 crappie; 350,000 bluegill; 20,000 cutthroat trout; 115,000 chinook salmon; 3 million northern pike; 10,000 paddlefish; 75,000 rainbow trout; 6 million walleye; and 2.2 million yellow perch.