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Mysterious disease killing off fish

Atlantic salmon program in danger

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/ BOYNE CITY, Mich. — Atlantic salmon, now zeroing in on their "home" Boyne River here, are still subject to a mysterious disease which is clouding their future prospects in the Great Lakes.

Steve Swan, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) district biologist who has primary responsibility for the introduction effort, said that experimental test nets at the mouth of the river in two recent days produced only one live Atlantic salmon, and it died immediately.

Swan said that mysterious red spots are appearing on the jaws and throats of the salmon, which have been released for the last three years in the Boyne.

"We have no idea what's causing them," he said. "It could be an environmental stress reaction because this Quebec strain of the Atlantic normally lives out a major portion of its life in salt water. It could be a mysterious fungus. It could be the result of contamination in the Boyne River itself.

"We suspect, however, that the disease they seem to die of originates through pollution in the Great Lakes or possibly Lake Charlevoix. The disease may be produced by the stress of chemicals. It seems that it reaches its climactic state just as the salmon enter the river."

He raised the possibility that the disease "might even be triggered by PCB," an industrial chemical which is present in most Lake Michigan fish.

Swan said that an effort will be made to trap at least 10 female salmon and a few males in Lake Charlevoix to be taken to the Oden Fish Hatchery where the water is colder and of better quality.

"If they live there, we'll have to suspect the water quality of the Boyne River," he said.

The 10 females would produce 70,000 to 80,000 eggs and releases of their progeny could possibly be tried in another river.

Last summer, several hundred salmon were trapped at a weir at Kircher Dam, three miles upstream from the mouth, but only 16 lived. They were all males, so they were tagged and released in Lake Charlevoix. Only one of them was recovered.

One other approach may yet save Michigan's Atlantic salmon program, David Borgeson, DNR inland fisheries supervisor, said. The first 3,000 parr of the Gullspang strain, imported from Sweden, were released in the Boyne. This strain spends all its life in fresh water and "just may be better adaptable to Great Lakes conditions," he said.