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High Mortality Alarms

PAGE ONE

Boyne's Atlantic Salmon In Danger

By DAVE PITT

BOYNE CITY—The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is bringing in from Canada next week an expert in the effect of pollution on fish in the great Lakes to determine if chemicals such as PCP and PCB are the cause of the high mortality rate of the Atlantic Salmon.

The Atlantic Salmon has been planted in the Boyne River since 1973 and it has been characterized by a high mortality rate upon its return to the Boyne to spawn. The mortality rate has reached 100 percent this summer in fish trapped in the river by the DNR. Steve Swan, district fish biologist from Gaylord, said the DNR has trapped 17 of the Atlantics so far this summer near a spawning pond in the river and another 15 at the mouth of the river and they are all dead or dying.

Swan said last year 250 Atlantics returned to the Boyne River and all but 16 died. The 16 that lived were all males. He said if even 10 females survive this summer the DNR could get 50,000 eggs.

Dr. Ron Sonnstegard, from the University of Guelph, is being brought to the Boyne River in an effort to determine if something in the lake is putting stress on the fish and causing them to die.

"Dr. Sonnstegard has done extensive work on the effect of pollution in the Great Lakes," Swan said. "He's good and we hope he can come up with some answers for us."

Suspects PCB or PCP

Swan admitted he himself is no expert on pollution in Lake Michigan and he doesn't have any evidence, but he said he suspects PCB or PCP, which has been found in other fish species in Lake Michigan, may be the culprit.

"The situation is as bad as you can get," the fish biologist said. "They're all dead. The frustrating thing is we don't know why they're dying. It's really discouraging, but we're not giving up hope."

"It's nothing we're doing at this end of the process (meaning the cause of the mortality is not in the river)," Swan said. "I'm convinced it's something to do with the Big Lake."

"The Atlantic Salmon is just a great fish for this area and we're going to do everything we possibly can to make this program go. It's really depressing to see all these fish just die."

Like Last Year

Swan said the Atlantics are showing the same symptoms as last year—red spots on their bodies which turn to open sores or lesions. The fish then turn dark, become lethargic and die.

"We've checked literally all over the world and no one else has found evidence of this problem," he said.

Swan is asking all fishermen and boaters who find Atlantic Salmon, either dead or alive, to contact any DNR office or State Park to report on the condition of the fish. The DNR is especially interested in Atlantics found in Lake Michigan and it is important for the DNR to know the location of the fish when it is found or caught.

The DNR planted 20,000 of the salmon smolts this spring as part of its annual planting program. In 1972, the first year of the program, 10,000 of the young fish were planted; in 1973 15,000 were planted; and last year 15,000 were planted.

Environmental Stress?

The dead fish have been checked and are disease free, Swan said. There seems to be some type of environmental stress on the Atlantics and the DNR can't figure out what that stress is.

It was thought the water temperature in the Boyne River is too high and this may be causing the problem. The temperature of the water is 70 degrees in some spots so the DNR dug a well and pumped 47 degree water into the river.

Swan said this has made no difference whatsoever in the fish mortality. He said the high water temperature may have aggravated the mortality problem, but it is not the cause.