Ecology South

**Toledo Blade**

**November 2012**

**Trout could restore piece of Erie history**

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WARREN, Pa. — A tragedy at a federal fish hatchery along the Allegheny River near here has ultimately created a windfall for Lake Erie, and provided the potential building blocks toward restoring a piece of the lake’s rich history.

Ohio recently received about 123,000 lake trout fingerlings from the Allegheny National Fish Hatchery, which sits in the mountains that straddle the Pennsylvania-New York line, near Jamestown.

The fish were excess stock from a facility whose entire inventory of lake trout and brook trout in 2005 was destroyed by infectious pancreatic necrosis (IPN), an extremely contagious and incurable virus that has a mortality rate as high as 90 percent in young fish.

As the hatchery was undergoing an extensive decontamination process, major infrastructure issues were exposed and all fish production at the facility was put on hold for several years while funding was secured and the needed improvements and upgrades at the site were made.

Late in 2011, after a retrofit, the hatchery took delivery of 1 million lake trout eggs from federal sources in Vermont, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The plan called for the trout fry to be raised at the site for about 18 months, then the regular releases of “yearling” size fish would take place at locations in the eastern basin of Lake Erie off New York state, and in Lake Ontario.

But the new and improved hatchery boasted a much higher survival rate for the young trout, however, creating an excess of fish. Ohio’s western and central basins of Lake Erie were the beneficiaries of this surplus stock.

“After all of their improvements, many more fish in this first batch survived,” said Kevin Kayle, fish biology supervisor for the Ohio Division of Wildlife’s research station at Fairport Harbor, east of Cleveland.

About 41,300 of the surplus lake trout fingerlings were released near Fairport Harbor, and another 82,400 went into Lake Erie at the Miller Boat Line ferry basin on the northern tip of Catawba Island.

“At the Allegheny hatchery, they just don’t have the capacity to raise all of the fish they had on hand to reach yearling size. They simply ran out of space,” Kayle said, “so we were able to receive some of the excess stock.”

Lake trout are native to Lake Erie and, historically, they were the dominant predator in the lake’s deeper and colder eastern end.

Their numbers plummeted, however, after sea lampreys slipped into the Great Lakes via the Welland Canal. These eel-like creatures are a jawless fish that is native to the Atlantic Ocean.

In the Great Lakes, lampreys attached themselves primarily to trout, salmon, or whitefish and fed off the blood and body fluids of their hosts with a round mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. Lampreys were first observed in Lake Erie around 1920, and they had an immediate and devastating impact on the lake trout population. “The lampreys really did them in,” Kayle said.

An aggressive program to reduce the population of lampreys has helped give the lake trout stocked in the Great Lakes a much better chance for survival. About 250

streams the invasive species uses for spawning are being treated each year.

Kayle said the lake trout that have been stocked in the eastern end of Lake Erie have produced a popular fishery. In 2003, New York angler Jesse Wykstra caught the

state record 41-pound, 8-ounce lake trout in the Lake Erie waters off Chautauqua County.

He said no significant reproduction of these stocked fish has been recorded, but the fish recently released off Catawba could possibly change that.

“There are places in the western basin where the native lake trout once spawned,” Kayle said. “They would make a long migration about this time of year, and spawn

on the reefs and shoals, such as those around Kelleys Island. These are only fingerlings that were released, but we hope they might imprint a little and return to this

area in five or six years to spawn.”

Kayle said the state is asking for an assist from anglers as it attempts to track the movement and the growth of this brood in the coming years. The lake trout that were

released at the Miller Boat Line site and at Fairport Harbor have coded wire tags attached to their snouts.

“We can gather some important data about the survival rate of these fish, their growth, and other key information, if anglers let us know when they catch one,” he said.

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