

February 8, 1996

REVIEW OF PFBC Class A Wild Trout Program Evaluation

Background

The 1995 Annual report of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission includes the item: "Completion of report reflecting positive response to stream sections managed in the wild trout program with no stocking".¹ This paper evaluates the candor of this claim.

In 1989, and 1993, similar reports were given to the public in the form of press releases proclaiming success of Wild Trout Management. After the first of these, I requested supporting data from coldwater unit leader, Martin Marcinko. He demurred this request, stating that if I wanted this information I would have to obtain it from stream files. (I later realized that the problem was that the data weren't available.)

After the second release, I requested these data from the new unit leader, Tom Green. Tom was more cooperative, but did not have information on the original data or the current data, in useable form. He offered to pull the current information together, which he did in a month or so. Since he had no original listing, there was no way that he could positively determine trends; therefore, there was also no solid basis for the glowing news releases.

With this information, and the 1982 data (which I had), I was able to determine that of the original list of 167 streams, 30 were no longer Class A, and another 24 were under special regulations. Of the original 30 degrades, only 13 were included as probable victims of overharvest, leaving 126 sections for comparison. Of these remaining sections, only 59 had significant biomass changes as of 1992. Of these, 20 were upgraded, but 39 were significantly (>10%) degraded. Viewed from a different perspective, only 20 of 167 sections were significantly (>10%) upgraded after a decade of passive management.² I gave the original stream section listing--a copy of which I had retained since 1982--to Tom Green to assist him in performing his own analysis of the results of continued general regulations to 'protect, conserve and enhance' our best wild trout streams.

The 1995 report apparently was the Fishery Bureau's response to these data and findings.

Findings

The report is troubling for several reasons. Primarily, the author was uncertain about the objectives for this wild trout management. It was stated that a common objective was, "maintaining standing stocks at or above...the qualifying survey". The authors then ignored this modest objective, and considered any section which remained Class A, regardless of the degree of degradation, as

representing a 'positive response'. A second objective was to double stocks of older (3+) trout. This objective was dismissed by stating that natural variation might limit its attainment, and, based on the report, was not evaluated, or it if was, the objective apparently was not attained.

For unknown reasons, only 71 of the 167 qualifying sections were evaluated, including 18 under special regulations, compared to my earlier 126, plus 24 under special management.² How many of the other sections have downgraded?

a. 1995 Status of Portion of Original (1982 list of Class A Sections which remain under Statewide Regulations (PFBC List including previously stocked and unstocked sections.

Brown Trout: 14 sections upgraded (including one which is under landowner C&R), and 28 downgraded.

Brook Trout: No sections upgraded; seven downgraded

Rainbow Trout: Two upgraded, one downgraded. All three of these streams have critically low populations: 3.79 to 15.86 Kg/ha, and require much greater protection.

b. The following Class A sections are under special regulations (PFBC list):

Brown Trout: 11 sections upgraded, 4 downgraded, including one that reflects thermal induced loss or relocation of fish.

Brook Trout: One section upgraded, none downgraded

Rainbow Trout: Two sections upgraded, none downgraded

Total Class A streams under special regulations: 14 upgrades and 4 downgrades. Population of these streams--excepting thermally troubled Penns Creek--were much higher, on average, than 'unregulated' wild trout streams.

Discussion

Without firm objectives it is impossible to measure success. Either wild trout objectives are missing or not understood. However, the attempt to claim success in the face of abject failure is alarming. This is the third time since 1989 that news releases have claimed that conservative regulations are not required to 'protect, preserve and enhance' wild trout streams. It is the written opinion of the Fisheries Bureau director that elimination of "effects" of stocking is all that is required. He fails to recognize that Class A streams now have a strong profile, and while not of interest to 'truck followers', are targeted by tens of thousands of our most expert anglers. As anglers nationwide are increasingly capable of catching greater numbers of trout, unprotected streams suffer. Two recently written books identifying our state's better trout streams insure

that few Class A streams are still secrets. Only the willingness of many of our best anglers to release most of their catch has prevented far worse stream degradation.

The above findings leave no doubt that our wild trout streams are being seriously degraded, unless under special regulations. Although 36 Class A sections were downgraded and only 16 upgraded, press releases and this report amazingly insinuate that most, if not all, Class A streams have been upgraded. The excellent trends and much higher populations of special regulated waters indicate that, given protective regulations, most of our Class A streams would also support much higher populations, while diffusing angling pressure from other waters.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania leads the nation with over 1250 trout angler hours per acre annually. Our statewide regulations are among the nation's most liberal. A brown trout stream under a typical state's regulations (creel limit of 4 or 5), will support up to ~~150~~⁴⁰⁰ angler hours per acre without degradation or special regs; brook trout--about 40 angler hours. Most states and provinces have far more conservative creel and/or size limits, particularly for fragile wild trout waters, than does Pennsylvania. The vast majority of our unregulated wild trout streams are regressing. The tables in the PFBC report confirm my 1993 findings.^{1&2}

One study supported up to 400 wild trout browns

Recommendations

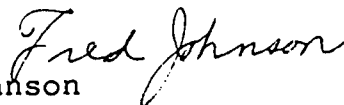
We must recognize that our liberal statewide trout regulations have failed to protect, much less enhance, our 950 miles of Class A wild trout streams.

I suggest that the objectives should include increasing biomass by at least 50%: minimum 45 Kg/ha for brooks; 60 kg/ha for browns. Numbers of 'quality' fish--12" for brown, 9" for brook--should double.

In his 1984 Wild Trout III presentation, Bureau Director Graff promised to make management changes on wild trout streams if "not as originally thought". Where are the changes? What were the objectives and were they met?

In order to meet suggested objectives, I recommend a Class A creel limit of two fish from the April opening to Labor Day; no-kill the rest of the year in order to diffuse angler pressure. Minimum sizes of 12 inches for brown trout, and 9 inches for brook trout, are also favored. In my opinion, these are the regulations necessary to create a sustained optimum fishery for most of our Class A streams.

Fred Johnson



¹Class A Wild Trout Program Evaluation. R. J. Weber, May 1995

²A Decade of Change: Pennsylvania's Class A Fisheries. Has the Management Strategy succeeded? F. Johnson