

Congressman Doug Collins (GA-9)

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Committee on Natural Resources: Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs

Oversight Hearing on the Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Hatchery System: Strategic Hatchery and Workforce Planning Report

Thank you Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and distinguished members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the recent National Fish Hatchery System Planning Report and the Chattahoochee National Forest Fish Hatchery that is located in Georgia's Ninth Congressional District.

Suches, Georgia is a sleepy community in Union County, located high up in the Appalachian Mountains. It is a rural area, without any major stores or banks. One thing that it does have, however, is the Chattahoochee National Fish Hatchery.

Chattahoochee is a mitigation hatchery, established in 1937, after the numerous dams and reservoirs disrupted the natural flow of fish to the area. It stocks the tail waters of multiple projects for the Army Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority with Rainbow Trout for the enjoyment of 160,000 anglers per year. These tail waters would be barren without this facility and the service that they provide.

To be honest, I was more than surprised when I heard that the Fish and Wildlife Service was thinking of closing this hatchery. It is beloved by the community, it shows great return on investment, and it is an economic engine of this rural part of Georgia. This hatchery is a major source of revenue for Suches, and Northeast Georgia in general, having generated just over \$30 million of total economic output on just a \$747,000 investment. Talk about bang for your buck, this hatchery delivers.

According to the Planning Report itself, "since its establishment in 1871, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Hatchery System has been a cornerstone of the Service's mission of working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." The American people, Mr. Chairman. Yet their statement seems to be a bit at odds with their stated priorities.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife has ranked its funding priorities in this report in the following order:

1. Recovery of species federally listed as threatened or endangered;
2. Restoration of imperiled aquatic species;
3. Tribal partnerships and trust responsibilities;

4. Other Propagation Programs for Native Species; and finally
5. Other Propagation Programs for Non-Native Species

Currently, more than 75% of the 291 propagation programs within the National Hatchery System exist within priorities 1-3. These first three priorities also make up nearly 90% of the funding from the National Hatchery System. The planning report looked at five potential funding scenarios: level funding, an 11% reduction, a 15% reduction, a 24% reduction, and a 5% increase. The Service concluded that meeting any cut or level funding would require “discontinuing Service funding for some of the lower priority propagation programs.” Please keep in mind that mitigation hatcheries fall under categories four and five, the lowest priority funding priorities.

This brings up a serious question, why should mitigation hatcheries be regarded as such low priority programs to the Fish and Wildlife Service? I believe stocking the tail waters, streams, lakes, and rivers of America should be a higher priority. Providing our nation’s anglers with the recreational enjoyment and opportunity to catch fish is an important service, particularly vital to the economic growth of Northeast Georgia.

It is important to note that the Chattahoochee Hatchery is nearly 90% reimbursed from the Army Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Why would the Service choose to denigrate propagation programs that they are being reimbursed for and that also provide real economic benefits to rural America? It is because of their bias towards Endangered Species Act related propagation. I recently had the privilege to serve as a member of Chairman Hastings’ Endangered Species Act Working Group. My involvement with the working group only reinforced significant and growing need for Congress to look at this bias and seek solutions to address such misguided policies.

In summation, I support the Chattahoochee National Fish Hatchery, as it plays an integral role in the sustainability of businesses and communities in Northeast Georgia. From providing environmental education and public outreach opportunities to visitors, school groups, and various other organizations to facilitating recreational opportunities to 160,000 anglers a year, Northeast Georgia would not be same without this facility. I appreciate the great work this Committee is doing to bring light to this issue and I hope to continue working with this Committee and its Members to address Fish and Wildlife Service’s bias against mitigation hatcheries. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify, Mr. Chairman.

I would also like to add a special thank you to Deborah Burger, the Hatchery Manager at Chattahoochee hatchery, for her 36 years of service at that location and congratulate her on her upcoming retirement. And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.