

STATEMENT OF NOREEN K. CLOUGH
CONSERVATION DIRECTOR
BASS/ESPN OUTDOORS ON BEHALF OF THE AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

CONCERNING THE STATUS OF THE NATIONAL FISH HATCHERY SYSTEM

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of the American Sportfishing Association, to provide our views on the National Fish Hatchery System from the recreational fishing perspective. In that regard, I also represent the more than 525,000 members of BASS, the world's largest fishing organization. Written testimony has been submitted for the record.

You specifically asked that we offer our views regarding: The existence of a consistent Federal/national policy for hatchery operations and protocols; how hatcheries benefit recreational fishing; improvements that might be made to the National Fish Hatchery System; whether or not Federal fish hatcheries incorporate the best scientific practices into operating protocols; the role of hatcheries in the broader context of fisheries management; and, future roles and needs of Federal hatcheries.

The existence of a consistent Federal/national policy for hatchery operations and protocols: The Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Hatchery System has been the subject of much scrutiny in recent years. The Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council did a thorough evaluation of the system and provided its findings and recommendations in its report, *Saving a System in Peril*, in September 2000. This report led to a larger study of the Service's fisheries program by the Council and the January 2002 report, *A Partnership Agenda for Fisheries Conservation*. The Fish and Wildlife Service had a solid and consistent set of operational policies and protocols for hatchery operations prior to these efforts and responded favorably to the reports by strengthening these areas.

The 134 year old National Fish Hatchery System is one-of-a-kind, and, in fact, was the base from which the Fish and Wildlife Service evolved. Despite being chronically underfunded and understaffed, it has continued operations with integrity and efficiency. I would urge the Subcommittee to review these two documents because they tell much about the strengths and needs of the National Fish Hatchery System. The Fish and Wildlife Service has just completed its strategic plan for Fisheries and it contains the necessary ingredients to continue solid policy and protocols for operating a National Fish Hatchery System and placing the operation of that system in the context of the Nation's fishery needs.

How hatcheries benefit recreational fishing: The 69 National Fish Hatcheries in 35 states provide healthy and genetically appropriate fish resulting in recreational fishing opportunities for over 35 million Americans. An example that the Chairman of this Subcommittee, and many other members can identify with is striped bass. Striped bass provide sportfishing for over 3 million anglers from Maine to North Carolina. A recently released report stated that "The recreational fishery for striped bass produced direct retail sales of \$2.41 billion and provided 63,278 full-time equivalent jobs." Total economic impact to the coastal communities from sportfishing for striped bass is \$6.6 billion. But the striped bass population was in danger in the 1980's and an ambitious restoration effort was undertaken to restore the stocks of this species. A major factor in the successful restoration was the National Fish Hatchery System contributing its expertise and fish to the effort. Without the direct contributions of the National Fish Hatchery System, the story of striped bass recovery would be far different.

National Fish Hatcheries also serve a broad role at the community level by providing aquatic resource and conservation education programs to the schools and visiting public, and contributing to the overall economic well being by generating direct revenue.

For example, data generated by the Fish and Wildlife Service's Mountain-Prairie Region for 2004 reveal that nearly 27 million fish were stocked, providing 4.6 million angler-days of fishing and 3,521 jobs with salaries totaling \$75.9 million, resulting in \$20.4 million in taxes paid. These stockings also created \$187.1 million in retail sales, \$326.1 million in industrial output and \$202.4 million in economic value (consumer surplus).

Similar information on the economic effects of trout production in the Service's Southeast Region was compiled in 2001. Those data indicated that the 6 federal hatcheries in four states – Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia, produced over 6.8 million trout annually for distribution in 7 states. Recreational fishing generated by these 6 hatcheries produced

over \$107 million annually in direct expenditures, in turn generating over \$212 million in related economic activity. Over 2,800 jobs depend on federal hatchery trout production in the Southeast. Fishing for these federally produced hatchery trout resulted in \$1.6 million in state income tax revenue, \$5.2 million in state sales tax revenue, and over \$5.4 million in Federal income tax. For each Federal budget dollar spent, recreational trout fishing in the Southeast generates from \$109 to \$141 in economic effects, and from \$5.18 to \$7.85 in state and federal tax revenue. A very impressive return on investment in both cases.

Improvements that might be made to the National Fish Hatchery System: The National Fish Hatchery System has undergone a number of recent reviews regarding strategic planning, performance, program alignment, etc. For all of these reviews, the resulting recommendations and plans have been honestly embraced by Fisheries Program management and staff. This has been demonstrated by continuing improvements in the overall focus and operation of the system and it is an ongoing process.

However, it is unreasonable for any of us to expect this trend to continue in the face of the seriously deteriorating infrastructure of the System and rapid evolution of the hatchery program. Today, the National Fish Hatchery System is a program that has become vital to the conservation, refuge and recovery of threatened and endangered aquatic species. While accepting this challenge as well as trying to maintain traditional ongoing activities, the System is faced with serious deferred maintenance issues. Hatcheries have crumbling raceways, unreliable electrical and back-up systems, compromised security systems, and numerous other problems and threats. The current list of Priority Fishery Operational Needs for the Hatchery System totals just about \$25million, which is vastly overshadowed by the current maintenance backlog of approximately \$245 million!

Examples include Edenton NFH, in North Carolina, where \$250,000 is necessary but unavailable to rehab a dangerously deteriorated holding house critical to production of important anadromous species including American shad. The roof sags and leaks, concrete tanks are in disrepair and the water delivery system is unreliable. Asbestos panels require abatement, and the electrical system has gone from merely unreliable to a personnel safety hazard.

At Jackson NFH in Wyoming, the hatchery building has been condemned due to seismic damage and poses a severe health threat for the staff. The ability to house and manage the on-station native cutthroat trout resource is compromised. However, the building cannot be demolished unless \$72,000 is provided for asbestos abatement of the walls and ceiling panels.

Threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout are jeopardized at Lahontan NFH in Nevada because the 20-year old generator needs replacing. This generator is essential to pump operations that ensure continued waterflow if commercial power is lost. At risk are more than 1 million fish.

And the list goes on.

Whether or not Federal fish hatcheries incorporate the best scientific practices into operating protocols: Integral to the National Fish Hatchery System is its nine Fish Health Centers, seven Fish Technology Centers, its trout egg/strain registry and trout broodstock and egg distribution facilities. These components of the federal hatchery system are what set it apart from just an eclectic collection of facilities into a truly integrated system that provides a high level of scientific and technical knowledge, tools and protocols to not just its own system of federal hatcheries, but to state hatcheries as well.

In a recent review of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries program it was concluded that, despite the serious issues surrounding having to depend on the US Geological Survey for long term research and science needs, the Fisheries program, through its Fish Health and Fish Technology centers was capable and nimble in being able to identify and incorporate the best scientific practices into operating protocols, and to perform research and studies required to meet immediate needs in fish culture and fish health.

Furthermore, the Fish Health centers have been able to provide outstanding services outside the Service. A key example is the performance of the Warm Springs, Georgia, National Fish Health Center in working cooperatively with us at BASS and other partners such as Auburn University and the American Fisheries Society, in helping to understand and evaluate the impacts and spread of largemouth bass virus. The LaCrosse Fish Health Center assesses the health of hatcheries and hatchery stocks to ensure that propagation and distribution of fish are disease free. In the Rocky Mountain region the Hatchery System has worked diligently with the states on diagnosing and stemming the spread of whirling disease. And in support of public and private hatcheries, the National Fish Hatchery System's aquatic animal drug approval partnership has provided national leadership in efforts to obtain FDA-approved and EPA-compliant drugs for use in hatcheries, commercial aquaculture and aquatic species management.

The Fish Technology Centers provide cutting edge science support in developing new fishery management technologies, particularly in the genetic management of broodstock and techniques in captive propagation. The Centers publish technical papers to ensure that these technologies and techniques meet a wide range of needs and users.

The role of hatcheries in the broader context of fisheries management: The National Fish Hatchery System has a critical role in fisheries management. Because of its geographic distribution and scientific base it provides a unifying force in aquatic ecosystem management, interjurisdictional fisheries, threatened and endangered species, habitat restoration, and the development of resource management strategies. The System is critical to understanding fisheries management needs.

In this regard, the recreational fishing community is very concerned and alarmed at the recent efforts of the Department of the Interior to implement the Administration's outsourcing initiative in the Fish and Wildlife Service by proposing to outsource National Fish Hatchery animal caretaker and biological technician positions. As A System in Peril so correctly pointed out, the National Fish Hatchery System is just that – a system of facilities that work collectively to contribute to fisheries management throughout this Nation. We are always concerned about efforts that might compromise the integrity of this system. The National Fish Hatchery System also works collectively with the state fisheries management partners, including state hatcheries. Therefore, to assume that animal caretakers or biological technicians on federal hatcheries can simply be replaced by non-federal contract employees is not only naive but potentially damaging to national fisheries management strategies. The National Fish Hatchery System has evolved to meet national needs. The resulting wide ranging and often very remote geographic distribution serves the system well, but would make it difficult to collectively manage through contract employees and offsite, centralized management.

The current staff of animal caretakers and biological technicians on National Fish Hatcheries represent some of the most dedicated and technically diverse staff anywhere in the Fish and Wildlife Service. They tend to take on all the challenges of running a hatchery and do not fit well into discrete job descriptions – they feed fish, spawn fish, make health tests, handle delicate fish fry, fix leaky roofs, mow lawns and fuel trucks as part of a day's work. Outsourcing these positions simply will not work. The result will be a far diminished and less responsive federal hatchery system.

Future roles and needs of Federal hatcheries. From the recreational fisheries perspective, we see the Hatchery System having a bright future of continuing and expanding its contributions to fishing and fisheries management.

One of the overarching themes we see is the growing role of the Fish Technology Centers and Fish Health Centers in ensuring that the finest diagnostic and technological tools are available to not only the Hatchery System but to the states and private growers as well. This ranges from research on Largemouth Bass Virus, to Whirling disease in trout, to stocking strategies for economically important species such as striped bass.

The Hatchery System has been very successful in defining its role in recreational fishing, working well with the States, other federal agencies and the angling community. It has defined its recreational fishing role in native and interjurisdictional fisheries, Sikes Act responsibility to military installations, and mitigation.

But it still suffers from the lack of any clear commitment on the part of the Fish and Wildlife Service itself, without even a Director's Order to legitimize this role for National Fish Hacheries. The result is inconsistent direction for the System and confusion and disappointment for constituents.

An immediate need of the Hatchery System is the resolution of funding reimbursement for the approximate \$11 million it expends in operating its mitigation hatcheries. We are encouraged that Congressman Nathan Deal of Georgia has taken the initiative where the Department of the Interior has failed. H.R. 537 provides a framework for funding while at the same time ensuring the continuation of the successful fisheries mitigation programs of the Service and Hatchery System. The contribution of the National Fish Hatchery System in support of mitigating water resources development impacts to recreational fishing is astounding, as I pointed out earlier. It is time for the project development agencies to step up to the plate and fund this mitigation work.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members, I want to thank you again for inviting the American Sportfishing Association to testify today. We are especially pleased to offer our views on the importance of the National Fish Hatchery System to recreational fishing in this country. The System has a proud history in contributing to fisheries management, and it's recent efforts to involve its constituents even more deeply in its planning and evaluation activities leads us to a greater appreciation of its achievements and its potential.