

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Executive Director's Report July 1, 2023, to September 30, 2023

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) strategic plan contains strategic priorities involving workforce, access, engagement, non-game species and habitat, infrastructure, and sport fish and habitat. This quarterly report provides examples of the PFBC's progress toward those priorities from July 1, 2023, through September 30, 2023.

Chapter 71a Rulemaking

In July 2023, the PFBC unanimously approved a final rulemaking relating to the propagation and introduction of fish into Commonwealth waters, resulting in the creation of a new chapter: Chapter 71a. Chapter 71a contains provisions aimed at reducing the risks of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) and pathogens through the creation of a Notice of Stocking (NOS), fish health inspection protocol, and watercraft inspection requirements. Chapter 71a will go into effect January 1, 2024.

Venture Outdoors Partnership

The PFBC worked with Venture Outdoors and the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) to offer pop-up education programs each Monday throughout the summer at Canonsburg Lake, Washington County. The program was so successful that fishing and kayaking programs were added for September, and fishing programs will be offered through the end of October. Building upon this success, Venture Outdoors and RBFF offered additional programs for school groups and senior citizen groups during weekdays. The PFBC hopes to offer this type of programming as part of its regular, annual lineup of outreach efforts going forward.

Monsanto Agreement

The PFBC worked in collaboration with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), and the Game Commission (PGC), to assist the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in reaching a consent agreement involving a \$100 million settlement with Monsanto Company regarding polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination. As part of the settlement, funds received by the PFBC may be used for improving public access and infrastructure and non-game species benefits.

Fisheries Field Work

Staff field work focused on unassessed and wild trout re-inventories during the quarter. Approximately 205 streams were surveyed. Of note was a survey of Letort Spring Run, sections 02 and 04, Cumberland County. Biomass estimates for Section 02 and Section 04 were 82 kg/ha and 237 kg/ha, respectively. Section 02 saw a 60 percent increase in Brown Trout biomass since that last survey in 2021, which is likely due to increased natural blowdowns providing additional overhead cover for adult trout. The exceptional quality of the trophy Brown Trout fishery in Section 04 was evidenced by the catch of 25 individuals greater than 20 inches over the 596 meters of electrofished stream, which translates into approximately one 20-inch Brown Trout every 25 meters!

In support of the *Strategic Plan for Management of Channel Catfish and Flathead Catfish in Pennsylvania*, staff conducted a survey on the North Branch Susquehanna River in the vicinity of the PFBC Union Access in Luzerne County. This site is in the area where Flathead Catfish were

first documented in the North Branch Susquehanna River and is used to monitor catfish populations following the introduction of Flathead Catfish. Total catch of the hoop net survey was 55 Channel Catfish ranging in length from 13 to 30 inches and 38 Flathead Catfish ranging in length from 21 to 39 inches with a weight range from 2.9 to 27.8 pounds.

Staff completed annual disease monitoring of young-of-year (YOY) Smallmouth Bass. YOY catch rates appear to be above average for sites on the Juniata and Susquehanna rivers with disease prevalence varying by site due to site-specific conditions (i.e., water temperatures, flows).

Dam Safety Improvements

- Childrens Lake, Cumberland County – Completed dam rehabilitation project including a new reinforced concrete dam structure, spillways, boat launch ramp, and ADA fishing pier. The total cost of improvements was approximately \$5.2 million.
- Belmont Lake Dam, Wayne County – Permits to rehabilitate the dam were obtained and construction is expected to begin in the summer of 2024.

Access Improvements

- Representative Garth Everett Muncy Access Area, Lycoming County – Staff designed and oversaw the construction of a new access site on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.
- Union Access, Luzerne County – Staff oversaw improvements, including the rehabilitation of approximately 35,000 square feet of asphalt parking lot for 16 passenger vehicles and 21 trailered parking spaces.
- Hallstead Access, Susquehanna County – Staff oversaw improvements, including the rehabilitation of 15,500 square feet of asphalt parking lot, which will provide parking for passenger vehicles and boat trailers.

Hatchery Improvements

The PFBC, in conjunction with the Department of General Services and private engineering firm, HDR, began the design phase of renovations at 13 state fish hatcheries. The renovations are expected to cost \$94 million and will involve improvements like raceway enclosure structures over outdoor fish rearing areas to prevent bird predation, provide a better rearing environment for the fish, and increase protection from AIS; UV disinfection of incubation and hatch house water to improve the health of the most fragile life stages; remodeling of hatch houses and rearing areas; protection of water sources; and upgrading work locations to better meet the diversity of employees.

Habitat Projects

Staff worked with project partners, including federal, state, and local agencies and non-governmental organizations, to improve habitat and angling opportunities for sportfish including four fish passage projects, 25 stream habitat projects, and 17 lake habitat projects. One project involved working with DCNR and the Pymatuning Lake Association to stabilize 1,700 feet of eroded shoreline by installing stone deflectors at Pymatuning Lake. The stone deflectors improve fish habitat, eliminate erosion, and provide excellent shoreline angler access.

Staff also worked with project partners to improve habitat for non-game species. During the quarter, staff advanced the following non-game species projects:

- Marsh Creek Lake, Chester County – The PFBC installed 25 turtle basking platforms.
- Susquehanna River Basin – The PFBC worked with the Mid-Atlantic Center for Herpetology and Conservation (MACHAC) to install 15 tons of flagstone boulders to improve cover, foraging, and nesting habitat for the Eastern Hellbender.

Operation Dry Water

Staff participated in Operation Dry Water, a national campaign featuring a period of heightened boating under the influence (BUI) awareness and enforcement over the Fourth of July weekend. The campaign began in Pennsylvania with events at Ridley Township Marina in Delaware County and at Point State Park in Pittsburgh and continued through July 3. Waterways Conservation Officers and Deputies from across the Commonwealth participated, totaling 2,196 hours of patrols; contact with 1,807 boats carrying 3,415 boaters; and issuance of 788 safety warnings, 262 boating and fishing citations, and 6 BUI citations.

Boating Safety

To underscore the importance of boating safety and lead by example, the PFBC recently updated its internal *Standard Operating Procedure for Boating, Water, and Ice Safety for Commission Staff and Volunteers*, and staff from the Bureau of Boating and Bureau of Law Enforcement provided on-the-water motorboat operations training to 53 field staff from across the agency over five separate training sessions in July and August at F.J. Sayers Lake (Bald Eagle State Park). Staff received instruction on basic motorboat operations and handling, safety equipment, trailering, launching/retrieving, and pre-departure checklists.

Boating Facilities Grant (BFG) Program

- The PFBC received a \$1 million grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to leverage BFG-funded access projects within the Delaware River watershed.
- Partnered with the Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers (POWR) to open a new Statewide Access Grant funding program for the development or enhancement of non-powered boating access.
- Collegeville Access Grant Project, Perkiomen Creek, Montgomery County – Rehabilitated an existing access for non-powered boaters to increase access to the lower portion of the Perkiomen Creek Water Trail.
- Fulling Mill Boat Launch Grant Project, Swatara Creek, Dauphin County – Improved access for both powered and non-powered boaters.
- Conestoga River Water Trail Improvement Plan Grant Project, Lancaster County – Completed a comprehensive water trail access improvement plan for the water trail.
- Mobile Boat Cleaning Stations Grant Project – Established a program to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS) through a grant to the PA Lake Management Society (PALMS). PALMS will tour lakes in Pennsylvania that are open for public boating and conduct educational AIS programs and demonstrations.

Erie Access Improvement Program

- Elk Creek, McKean Township, Erie County – McKean Township in conjunction with the Lake Erie Region Conservancy added an ADA accessible fishing pier and 1.1 miles of trails for public fishing access, one-third of which are ADA accessible.
- Crooked Creek, Erie County – The PFBC acquired a public fishing easement, which added 4,990 linear feet of angler access.

Equal Employment Opportunity, Harassment, and Discrimination Training

To ensure a welcoming workplace environment that allows the PFBC to attract and retain highly qualified staff and volunteers, the PFBC's Chief Counsel Human Resources staff, worked with the Office of Administration to develop Equal Employment Opportunity, Harassment, and Discrimination training for all PFBC staff. The PFBC executive staff and the leadership of the Bureau of Law Enforcement received the in-person training and in-person sessions for supervisors and employees are scheduled in early November for locations in Erie, Harrisburg, and Bellefonte.

First-time License Buyer Survey

Staff conducted an analysis of license sales data that showed more than 60% of the people who buy a fishing license for the first time will not buy again. Staff then conducted a survey this summer of first-time license buyers who did not buy again to gain insights about their motivations. Preliminary results suggest that this low-invested audience was motivated to buy a fishing license because they were invited to fish. Analysis of the survey data will continue, and staff will continue to modify and develop programming and initiatives to reactivate this audience.