



pennsylvania

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

SECRETARY

April 16, 2012

Mr. John Arway
Executive Director
Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission
P.O. Box 67000
Harrisburg, PA 17006-7000

Dear Executive Director Arway:

Thank you for your letter of April 4, 2012 regarding the health of the smallmouth bass population in the Susquehanna River.

As you know, your own Deputy Director of Operations of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) was recently quoted extensively on this topic in the Harrisburg Patriot News of April 8, 2012. According to Mr. Shiels, the condition is commonly known as "blotchy bass" or "black spot" and has been documented occasionally in various waters since as early as 1980. The PFBC itself is noted as having advised that anglers who have been reporting spotted bass to the Commission over the past year or so need not worry about the condition doing any permanent harm to individual fish or the population in general. Also, it was reported that in 1986 a nationwide survey found that the condition was present in 11 other states, including New York, Delaware and Maryland. Further, Mr. Shiels says that while the appearance of these spots may be alarming, there is no harm to human health from consuming these fish. PFBC biologists have previously documented this condition in the Susquehanna River in 2006; Cowanesque Lake in Tioga County in 2003; the Allegheny River in 1999; and the Conneaut Lake in Crawford County, Presque Isle Bay in Erie County and Raystown Lake in Huntingdon County in the 1980s

As you are aware, the Interagency Workgroup was established in 2007, and the membership is made up of scientists from DEP, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the PFBC. The workgroup has been collecting information to help determine what stressors may be responsible. The lesions and sores found on the fish are a focus of the study. It is a complex problem and the reasons are not yet fully understood. We encourage citizens to continue reporting these observations in order to assist the interagency workgroup to identifying problems the Susquehanna River may be facing.

Pennsylvania's Chesapeake Bay Program has made significant strides in reducing the levels of nutrients and sediments entering the river. Greater improvement is expected under the Phase 2 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan. As a result, considerable effort is being made to stop and reverse the impacts to the Susquehanna River.

The disease problems may be indicative of some stressor to the fish. However, the disease is yet to be tied to any particular identifiable stressors. At this time the facts and science do not

support placing the river on the Section 303(d) list. Since we do not know what the stressor to the fish is at this point there is nothing to appropriately or with factual support impair the river for. I would also add that the water quality data collected so far for dissolved oxygen and pH does not indicate a 303(d) listing is factually or legally warranted. That is why the Susquehanna River does not appear on the draft 2012 Integrated Report.

Staff reviewed the data submission you sent August 31, 2011. This data is not new and we were familiar with it. My staff determined the data does not support an action to impair the ninety-eight mile segment from Sunbury to the Holtwood Dam for pH and dissolved oxygen. The Interagency Workgroup agrees since it also has reviewed this same data and the workgroup has not recommended the river be impaired for dissolved oxygen or pH.

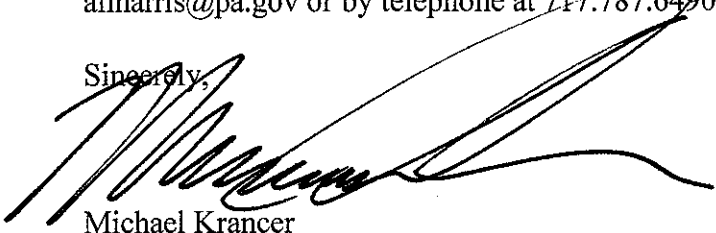
Not being placed on the 303(d) list does not mean that the water body will not be studied with great rigor. The smallmouth bass situation is going to be studied regardless of whether the water appears on the 303(d) list or not. As you stated, DEP has provided funds, devoted staff time in the field and on committees, and added Water Quality Network (WQN) gages to help study the problem. The WQN gages will continue to operate and staff will assist when they can.

The studies done by Viki Blazer of USGS have so far shown the most promise in unraveling the mystery behind the diseases, and the hope is that her continued work will lead to an understanding of the problem. Until then, identification of the stressors behind the cause of the disease remains speculation. The interagency work group studying the disease problem has reviewed all data related to possible stressors but has not been able to reach a conclusion. In short, the smallmouth bass diseases at this time is not scientifically tied to any water quality chemical stressors.

DEP staff have cooperated and worked hard to complete the field studies and participate on advisory committees. Resources have indeed been committed to studying the river. If something is to be accomplished to help the situation in the river, it must be accomplished through cooperation.

If you have additional concerns and would like to discuss this in greater detail, please contact Alisa Harris, Acting Special Deputy Secretary for External Affairs, by e-mail at aliharris@pa.gov or by telephone at 717.787.6490.

Sincerely,



Michael Krancer
Secretary