



## Time for Some Straight Talk

When Ralph Abele was executive director of the Fish & Boat Commission, he called this column "Straight Talk." We retired the name "Straight Talk" as a tribute to Ralph, but this column is still a place where we can set the record straight about issues related to the Fish & Boat Commission and fishing and boating in Pennsylvania.

The Fish & Boat Commission is a user-funded agency. For many months, we've been meeting with sportsmen and providing them with the facts about our fiscal situation. It seems that whenever a user-funded agency like ours starts the process of asking for increased license fees, some take the opportunity to attack our programs and disparage our agency. All too often we hear statements that are not based on the real issues. Let me give you a few examples:

*Myth: "The Fish & Boat Commission does not deserve additional money for the state hatcheries because they are major polluters."* Fact: To deny funding to improve the hatcheries because the hatcheries have problems defies all logic. State hatcheries managed by the Fish & Boat Commission have compiled a significant record of compliance with environmental standards. To hear some accounts, you might believe that the streams downstream of our hatcheries contain no fish, but just the opposite is the case. Our hatcheries have not caused fish kills, and at many locations, the downstream areas are prime fishing locations. Of course, they must do even better to meet evolving standards in new permits and avoid stream impairment. Working with DEP and other agencies, we are making strides in this area. That's why the Commission made a commitment to reduce waste loads from our hatcheries, and that's why we are seeking additional funding to upgrade waste treatment facilities with the latest technology.

*Myth: "Pennsylvania state fish hatcheries are among the worst polluters of the Chesapeake Bay."* Fact: The available statistics do not support labeling our hatcheries as top polluters of the Chesapeake Bay. Nonpoint sources (agriculture, forestry, atmospheric deposition, urban runoff) contribute the majority of nutrient-loading to the Bay. Agriculture alone delivers 41 percent of the nitrogen and 47 percent of the phosphorus while all point sources combined contribute 22.1 percent and 22.3 percent respectively.

State hatcheries do contribute nutrients to the Bay through point source discharges, and we are committed to reducing these discharges with adequate time and funding. There are more than 140 point source discharges identified as nutrient contributors in the 2000 water quality report issued by the Chesapeake Bay Program. The listing is not complete, but it does include five state fish hatcheries. Comparing the hatcheries on a "facility-by-facility basis," the listed state hatchery that contributes the highest loading ranks 35<sup>th</sup> of the 142 listed dischargers for nitrogen-loading and 81<sup>st</sup> of 142 for

phosphorus-loading. All five of the listed hatcheries taken together contributed much less nutrients than just one of the municipal sewage treatment plants listed in the report! Only by looking at just the 18 listed "industrial facilities" do the combined total for the five hatcheries appear near the top of any list. This just goes to show that selective use of statistics can paint an incomplete picture.

*Myth: The Fish & Boat Commission has ignored problems with its hatcheries for years.* Fact: We've been addressing these issues and seeking funds for our hatcheries for years. In the last 10 years alone, we devoted over \$10 million to hatchery improvement projects. For the last six years, we have been highlighting the need to get adequate funding to address a growing backlog of infrastructure projects, particularly at our hatcheries. We've made it clear that it's impossible to pay for these major capital projects with operating funds alone. In pending capital budget legislation, we've been authorized (for the first time in many years) to incur debt to finance five large-scale hatchery upgrades.

*Myth: The Commission should have fixed up the hatcheries instead of building a new headquarters.* Fact: The construction of a new headquarters for the Fish & Boat Commission represents a sound investment of angler and boater dollars. The funds used for the headquarters were specially appropriated for this limited purpose. In fact, the General Assembly twice passed legislation to approve building our headquarters, and they specifically authorized us to use a unique lease-purchase arrangement for this project. Under the law, we could not have used this financing arrangement for hatchery projects. For many years the Commission rented offices and warehouse space in the Harrisburg area. By building a state office building to house Commission offices and warehouse space, we will save money in the long run. In just 15 years the lease-purchase will be paid off and the Commonwealth will own this building outright. Instead of paying ever-increasing rents, we have stable payments and a functional, efficient headquarters to provide better service for Pennsylvania anglers and boaters.

*Myth: Trout stocked from Pennsylvania state hatcheries are not safe.* Fact: Pennsylvania state hatchery trout are safe to catch, safe to handle and safe to eat in moderation consistent with consumption advice. Pennsylvania is the only state to test its state hatchery trout regularly for levels of PCBs and announce the results using Great Lakes Consumption Advisory Protocols. These consumption advisories are not health warnings or regulatory standards. They are designed to help anglers plan their consumption of sportfish, and they focus on pregnant women, women of childbearing age, children and those who consume large numbers of sportfish from the same sources. Consumption advisory standards go beyond the regulatory standards applied to fish sold as foodstuff in interstate commerce. In fact, Pennsylvania state hatchery fish

are well within the standards applied to commercial fish.

*Myth: There are more consumption advisories on fish today than in the past, so the fish must be getting worse.* Fact: Most of the new consumption advisories issued in the last few years are the result of changes in the way Pennsylvania (and other states) describe the levels of certain chemicals found in sportfish. For example, the EPA recommended that the states base sportfish consumption advisories for mercury on different (lower) levels of mercury than those used in the past, and Pennsylvania has followed this advice. This has resulted in more consumption advisory listings not because the quality of the fish is any worse but because the science is getting better. Consumption advisories are information tools to help anglers plan how many sportfish they and their families should consume.

The Fish & Boat Commission is not alone in the challenges we face. All across America, fish and wildlife agencies are trying to find adequate funding to provide top-quality programs and address infrastructure needs. In articles entitled "Storm Warnings" in the last two issues of *Field and Stream* magazine, the national issues related to adequate funding for fishing and hunting programs were described in detail. Last spring, *Outdoor Life* featured an article on "Hatcheries in Crisis," which described the urgent need to upgrade our national fish hatcheries.

The Fish & Boat Commission is here to serve the anglers and boaters of Pennsylvania by providing fishing and boating opportunities and protecting and managing our precious aquatic resources. We're committed to addressing today's challenges and making even greater strides in the future. The fact is that meeting these challenges will require time and money, and everyone knows it. Let's focus on the real issues of designing a reasonable funding package to "keep Pennsylvania fishing." ☐

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### On the cover

Barry & Cathy Beck photographed the brook trout on this issue's cover.

