MONTANA'S FISHERIES PROGRAM

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I want to describe Montana's fishery program to this Commission, not because I think it is the best one in your region (although I'll certainly admit I am proud of it) but because Montana's different fishery resource demands a program with different orientation than that of the coastal states.

I hope that my discussion of our program will give you two things. First, the knowledge that state fishery management agencies already have the responsibility for carrying out management programs to the full extent of their present financial capability. In other words, we do not have any fishery workers who are just sitting back, waiting hopefully for someone to hand them a long-range planning outline to start working on. On the contrary; we have people already working somewhat more than 8-hour days who realize that any major planning effort the fisheries division undertakes must either be separately funded, or they are going to lose even more of their "spare" time than they do at present. Also, I hope that my discussion will give you the understanding that the solutions to the problems and the final plans you must eventually develop, approve and adopt cannot be expected to be uniform in design and application to the fishery resources of the entire Columbia drainage.

Anadromous fisheries are an important part of the resources of Oregon, Washington and Idaho, but anadromous fish do not even enter Montana. And although anadromous fisheries certainly have problems, they are quite different problems than those of resident stream fisheries. An anadromous fish depends basically upon the productivity of the sea for his growth, and if you can solve the techniques of getting the adult fish to a suitable place to spawn and getting the young fish back to the sea to grow, you have it made, even if the spawning and early rearing must occur in a hatchery. I don't mean to say these technical problems are simple, they surely aren't. Such things as ladder design and operation, collection of downstream migrants from forebays to prevent them from becoming fish hash in the turbine blades, and keeping them out of irrigation diversions on their trip to the sea are all knotty problems, but they are all solvable by basically mechanical means, coupled with an understanding of the biology of the particular beast you are working with. And once you have these basically mechanical problems solved, you still have the vast productivity of the ocean to give you the pounds of adult fish you need for a good fishery.

The same is certainly not true for a resident stream trout fishery. All the numbers and pounds of the wild stream trout for which Montana is famous

are being produced right in her streams. And when a piece of our stream resource has been dried up by irrigation, or heated to an unsuitable temperature by thermal additions, or drowned forever by a fluctuating reservoir, then the best stream trout resource in the nation today is going to produce just so many less trout in the future. True, the fluctuating reservoir can sometimes be made to produce an acceptable fishery by substitution of the proper size of sub-catchable hatchery trout for the natural reproduction that can no longer occur in the reservoir's still waters. It is also true that a lot of boaters, water skiers and swimmers will use the reservoir that didn't use the stream. But there is little shortage of boating, skiing or reservoir fishing in Montana or in the Northwest in 1968. And there certainly is a shortage of good stream fishing in our nation as evidenced by the growing numbers of out-of-staters on our streams each year. A large portion of California anglers don't visit us each summer to try for our catchable-size planters, or to ski on our reservoirs. They have lots of that at home. They come to Montana to try for a wild trout in a stream like our Madison, Big Hole or Clark Fork that they don't have at home.

Thus, as you might expect, our fishery program is considerably more habitat than species oriented. By this I mean we are more concerned with

preserving some of our already excellent resource than we are in trying to develop or discover some new species or strain of fish that might survive a little better or grow a little faster than our present ones in an almost dry channel, or in hot water, or in a violently fluctuating reservoir.

The objectives of our program are similar to those of many other state fishery programs, I am sure. Simply stated, they are to manage the waters of Montana to provide the greatest amount of high-quality recreational fishing possible and to provide for commercial utilization of nongame species to the extent that commercial operation are commensurate with good sport fishing. The program has two parts, an action phase and a fact-finding phase. Both are important to good fishery management.

The fact-finding phase contains projects that vary from general survey, such as locating and classifying Montana's waters and getting information on the fish they contain, to studies of the effects on fish populations of specific habitat modifications, such as pollution or dewatering. This fact-finding phase is mostly concerned with solving specific management problems. More basic research projects are usually left to the colleges and universities, specifically the Montana Cooperative Fisheries Unit to which the Department gives financial support.

The action phase of our program is composed of six general jobs. These are:

1. Habitat preservation, restoration and improvement.

   An adequate supply of quality water and a natural channel that provides pools, riffles and streambank cover are essential for good stream production of wild trout. Because many of our streams have these qualities, we enjoy some of the best stream-trout fishing in the nation today. Pollution, dewatering and channel straightening have reduced trout production in many of our streams. Preventing such losses by pollution control and working with constructing agencies and individuals to reduce or prevent channel alterations is our most important job for the future of Montana's fishing.

2. Purchase and development of access areas.

   To insure that a growing number of anglers will be able to get to their fishing water, more and more access areas are necessary. The Fish and Game Department presently owns, operates or sponsors 107 fishing access areas. These sites are being developed and we must continue to purchase additional key sites each year.

3. Population manipulation.

This includes chemically treating waters to remove rough fish populations and restocking with small game fish. It also includes planting small trout in waters where trout are unable to spawn. These plants of small fish, were they have good survival to catchable size, represent the most economical use of our hatchery product.

4. Regulations.

Regulations have generally been more restrictive than necessary. This causes some fish populations to be underharvested and fishing opportunity for some anglers to be denied at times of the year when it could just as well be allowed. Over the years our regulations have been liberalized - most size limits have been abandoned, more waters have been opened to winter fishing, and many winter seasons have been lengthened.

Good regulations have a definite place in fisheries management. As fishing pressures increase, more intensive fisheries management will be applied and this will include regulations tailored to insure harvests compatible with fish populations.

5. Planting catchable-sized fish.

Most of the catchable-sized trout reared in Montana are planted in

streams to increase the anglers' catch above what the stream would produce naturally. Carryover of planted fish to subsequent years is negligible, therefore they are planted in accessible areas where they have the best chance of being caught soon after planting. This procedure is effective, but expensive and is strictly for improving today's fishing, not tomorrow's. Also this type of fishing can be made available most anywhere and is quite different from the wild, stream-trout fishing for which Montana is famous.

6. Commercial fisheries development.

I list this last, not because we feel it is unimportant to utilize an otherwise wasted portion of our resource, but because commercial fishing is a very small part of our overall program. Last year, which was our best, Montana and commercial operators took and sold about 1.2 million pounds, mostly Buffalo and Carp. This is a very small amount compared to marine commercial harvests, but enough to qualify us for at least the minimum participation in the Federal Aid in Commercial Fisheries Development Act, so we do have one commercial fisheries study underway on Fort Peck Reservoir.