Who Pays For What?

by Art Whitney

Anglers have been paying for their fishing in Montana ever since the idea of unlimited, free fishing was abandoned early in this century. At that time limits and license fees were initiated to preserve fish stocks and to provide funds for management.

Management began mostly with planting fish. Much of the early stocking led immediately to better fishing, particularly when fish were released into new waters. **Memories of the early successes and the almost universal idea (probably carried over from banking) that one really should put something back for everything he takes out have given fish stocking a popularity that is somewhat out of proportion to its real value in fisheries management.**

Some of the stocking the public demands is ineffective and one very popular type of stocking costs more than the benefits it provides. This is the stocking of seven-inch and larger trout for immediate harvest. Under Montana's licensing system people who take several limits of these fish per year are having their sport heavily subsidized by the anglers who fish only for wild trout.

Why then is this type of stocking used in Montana? Is there any course of action that might put it on a more equitable financial basis? To answer these questions one must first understand why fish are planted.

Fishing can be improved through two different methods of planting fish—one, by making up for insufficient reproduction, and two, by making up for insufficient production.

The first situation usually represents good resource management. Where spawning areas are lacking, but habitat is otherwise good, a greatly improved fishery can be created by planting small fish. The situation occurs in many ponds and reservoirs and some lakes, but in only very few streams. Small fish are more economical to raise than catchables and they grow to become almost indistinguishable from their wild cousins. They are acceptable to most anglers. Stocking like this has provided the bulk of the fishery in places

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like Canyon Ferry, Georgetown Lake, Big Horn River below Yellowtail Dam and most of the eastern Montana farm ponds that provide trout fishing. This stocking represents a good use of hatchery fish and produces fishing in areas where the fishery would otherwise be either non-existent or greatly reduced.

The other type of stocking, which is to make up for insufficient production of fish in a body of water, represents a questionable resource policy. **This attempt to provide instant fishing for the inexperienced angler who is not skillful enough to catch wild stream trout isn't really resource management. It could as well be done in a stock water tank on main street as in the Big Hole or the Madison Rivers and it is effective only for a short period.** Why then is it done? Because the public demands some stream stocking, and catchable stocking is the only effective method of improving the catch per hour for the inexperienced angler in a stream that has good natural reproduction.

Stream stocking used to be considered a means of replacing what fishermen took from the streams, comparable to replacing money drawn from a bank. It was thought that the fish which were caught had to be replenished or they would all be gone. **Trout in a stream are not at all like dollars in a vault.** They reproduce, grow and die. They reproduce in such large numbers that many little fish have to die each year because a stream has a carrying capacity for only a certain number, or pounds, of fish. Consequently, the little fish stocked in streams 10 to 20 years ago didn't make more big fish available to fishermen as it was hoped they would. **If any of the planted fish survived to be caught, they did so at the expense of some naturally spawned fish.** Early "maintenance" planting did nothing towards improving fishing in subsequent years.

The reproductive potential of fish is really overwhelming. A 100-foot section of good stream might support 20 adult fish. If this section held 10 pairs of spawning fish, and each female deposited 1,500 eggs, a total of 15,000 eggs would be in the gravel. It is not unreasonable to expect that 90 per cent of these eggs would hatch, producing 13,500 fry in an area which could support only 20 adult fish. This means that 13,480 would die before they reached adulthood. Most of the mortality occurs the first few months after hatching.

If planting little trout in an already occupied stream does no good, what kind of planting will improve fishing? More than 15 years ago the Fish and Game Department began rearing and planting trout the size that fishermen would consider "keepers." It was found that on a short-term basis, this type of stocking put more fish in the creels. However, it was also found to be very expensive and the results were short-lived.

On a statewide average it costs more than 20 cents to raise and plant each eight- to nine-inch rainbow trout. Even in the best areas, fishermen catch only about 40 per cent of the planted fish. Simple arithmetic shows that each fish creeled represents more than a 50-cent investment. **One limit of 10 planted catchable fish would represent $5.00 — more than the resident pays for his fishing license.**

If nothing else could be done to maintain or improve fishing, nearly all stream management funds would probably go into stocking catchable-sized trout. It is popular, the results are quickly realized, and even the guy who wants to catch only wild fish receives some benefit from it by having fewer fishermen in the areas where he wants to fish. However, the future of sports stream fishing depends upon the miles of trout streams, the quality of streams, the amount of water available to the streams and the quality of water. Competition for water with agriculture, industry and domestic sources, water pollution and destruction of stream habitat through dam building and other construction are the specters that haunt the shores of trout streams.

Stream planting as it is done today is effective and popular, and public demand will prob-

Many people enjoy the carnival-like atmosphere of roadside fishing for catchable-size planted trout. This type of fisheries management represents an effective, but expensive, way of providing easier fishing.

ably require that it be continued at its present level. It is easy to see why people who benefit most from catchable planting want it continued. One license fee pays for less than one limit of catchables. Thus, anyone taking more than one limit of these fish is having his sport subsidized by other anglers. It's really no wonder that fishermen who enjoy taking catchables keep asking for more. The answer to, "How many free fish do you want?" will always be, "All I can get."

What is surprising is that the people who prefer wild fish (or the fishing provided by small-fish plants) have not complained more about the catchable program. In effect the expenditures for raising and planting catchables represent a tax on these people from which they derive little benefit.

A much more equitable way that catchable planting could be financed would be to require that anglers who insist on having this type of fishing pay for it, or at least pay some additional fee beyond what is required to fish for wild fish.

Such an additional charge for fishing in areas planted with catchables is not a new idea. It is already in use in 13 states. Cost varies from $1.00 to $5.00 per season for all the 11 states using an annual stamp or permit. The other two states require a daily fee of $1.00. Such fees, of course, still do not make the angler who takes lots of catchables pay for all his fish. Only the commercial catch-out pond, which requires a fee of so much per inch or pound for each fish taken, does this. However, this additional fee makes the beneficiaries of the catchable stocking program pay for part of it. It also emphasizes the fact that catchable stocking requires expenditures above and beyond those of regular fishery management.

Montana could implement a fee program by requiring both a valid fishing license and a stamp, good for the same period as the license, to fish in waters posted as catchable-management areas. This would require legislative action and the fee would, of course, be set by the legislature.

Any major changes in the current stocking program would depend on the interest shown in the catchable program as demonstrated by the amount of support given to the new stamp sales. In 1970 almost 615,000 catchable-sized trout were planted for immediate harvest in 98 streams and 69 lakes, ponds and reservoirs. About 8.3 million other salmonids (mostly small-sized rainbow and kokanee) were also planted in several hundred other waters, either as new introductions or to supplement natural reproduction. If the stamp program was adopted, the areas where the stamp would be required would be posted and publicized.

If the money derived from the new stamps came close to financing the catchable production, it would probably continue at about the same level. The program would be built up or reduced depending on its financial support. If funds from the new stamps warranted a larger program, then expansion of catchable production would have its built-in financing and would not detract from other programs of more lasting benefit. On the other hand, if funds from the stamps fell far short of supporting the present program, catchable stocking would be reduced and production facilities would be switched from catchables to small fish for lake and reservoir planting. Since any reduction of large fish production frees facilities for production of many more small fish, our reservoir and lake stocking capability would be materially increased.

In any event, the total income from catchable stamps would free other dollars for more important long-range programs such as habitat protection and improvement. Some income could be used to evaluate certain regulations for quality fishing areas. Restrictions such as shorter seasons, size limits and reduced bag limits are frequently requested by anglers who want higher quality fishing — that is, a better chance of taking a large fish. The restrictions have not been added because no one knows if they would have the desired effect under Montana's relatively low fishing pressure. They should be evaluated.

Admittedly, those wanting a chance at more large fish (at the expense of reducing the total fishing opportunity) represent a special interest group. However, their request is certainly as valid as the request of the special interest group which now has instant fishing provided by the catchable program.

So who pays for what? All anglers pay for all fisheries management costs through their license fees, and anglers are quite equal in sharing the benefits from most management measures—operations such as habitat preservation and improvement, access development and stocking small fish in lakes and reservoirs. But one group, those who demand easy, instant fishing at the roadside, are having their sport heavily subsidized by anglers who don't enjoy this type of fishing. A special fee requirement to participate in this particular public recreation program would provide a much more equitable distribution of fishery management costs.

This scene on the Big Salmon River in the Bob Marsh Wilderness exemplifies the true value of wilderness fishir Under present license requirements, fishermen respondi only to the lure of the wary, wild trout are paying pc of the high cost of raising catchable-size trout f roadside fishing. (F&G photo by Otis Robbins)