

Fish Hatcheries' Supporters Fear They Could Be On Budget Chopping Block Again



Department of Energy and Environmental Protection fish-maintainer Cory Cavello helps an Atlantic Salmon into an earthen pond at the Kensington State Fish Hatchery Oct. 3. (Mark Mirko, Hartford Courant)

By **Gregory B. Hladky**

DECEMBER 28, 2014, 7:37 PM

BERLIN — The folks who run the Kensington Hatchery and their colleagues at the two other state fish-raising operations worry a lot about predators.

Hérons, kingfishers, osprey and eagles snatch thousands of young trout and salmon from hatchery ponds every year. The greatest threat, however, might come from the budget hawks who roost at the state Capitol.

In 2011 and again in 2013, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's fiscal gurus attempted to save money by shutting down one of the hatcheries.

Those efforts failed, due largely to impassioned opposition from anglers, fishing retailers, schoolchildren and arguments that the hatcheries are directly and indirectly contributing millions to state revenues and the state economy.

Today, the state is once again facing a potential budget deficit of close to \$100 million. Malloy has already ordered the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection — the agency in charge of the

hatcheries — to cut about \$1.6 million in spending.

So far, those reductions haven't directly targeted any of the state hatcheries but the governor's fiscal advisers are making no promises.

"We can't rule it out and we can't rule it in," Gian-Carl Casa, a spokesman for Malloy's budget office, said of the possibility that a state fish hatchery could once more be on the governor's cut list as officials prepare budget recommendations for 2015-16. "These decisions haven't been made yet because we're still working on the budget plan."

And that's making a lot of anglers and other hatchery admirers nervous.

"Do I think they're safe?" said Ed Albrecht, Connecticut coordinator for a Trout Unlimited program that makes it possible for students to raise fish in school aquariums using eggs from state hatcheries. "No, I don't think they're safe at all."

"We've been on the chopping block twice," Al Sonski, hatchery supervisor for the Kensington operation, said one frigid morning recently.

"Of course we're worried about it again," said Sonski, who has worked for the state for 30 years. "I have absolutely no faith ... in the people who hold the purse strings."

\$3.2 Million Annually

Bob Crook, head of the Coalition of Connecticut Sportsmen, is convinced that the Malloy administration will try again to eliminate at least one of the hatcheries.

"I don't think they have any institutional memory up there," Crook said of why Malloy's administration might try cutting a hatchery when it has failed twice in the past.

It costs Connecticut taxpayers more than \$3.2 million annually to operate state hatcheries in the Kensington section of Berlin, Burlington and the Quinebaug area of Plainfield. The money pays for the raising of hundreds of thousands of trout, salmon and other game fish released each year into streams, rivers, ponds and lakes throughout the state.

In 2013, more than 1.2 million state-raised fish were stocked in Connecticut's waters.

State environmental officials say those hatchery fish are a key reason why approximately 342,000 people in Connecticut and from throughout the U.S. spent so much time and money trying to catch the trout, salmon and other species that are released into the state's waters.

According to a 2011 federal survey, anglers went fishing in Connecticut a total of 4.4 million days, with an average of 14 days per angler. Total fishing-related expenditures in Connecticut amounted to more than \$436 million in 2011, federal experts estimated. That covered everything from sales of fishing poles and boats to hotel and motel charges for the estimated 65,000 out-of-state anglers who came to try their luck in Connecticut waters.

Bill Hyatt is chief of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's bureau of natural resources. He said that the state is also getting more than \$13 million a year in direct revenue from fishing

licenses and federal funds generated by an excise tax on the sale of fishing equipment.

Hyatt said those sorts of statistics are a key reason why DEEP officials "feel pretty good about our chances" of avoiding a hatchery closure during the current budget crunch.

'Logic Would Tell You'

"Logic would tell you that [the hatcheries] are safe," said Albrecht, 68. "It doesn't make sense to close them."

"We definitely realize the state has some budget woes and hard decisions to make," Hyatt said, adding that, "We have no reason to believe [the state hatcheries] will be under the gun this coming year."

Yet Malloy's budget-cutters were aware of those federal and state fishing-related revenues and economic statistics in 2011 when the governor proposed shutting down the Kensington hatchery. The Kensington facility was again listed by Malloy as a potential spending cut option in 2013.

Hyatt said that one possible reason why the Kensington hatchery kept being targeted for closure was its participation in a failed federal/state effort to restore Atlantic salmon to the Connecticut River watershed.

The Atlantic salmon raised at Kensington were originally being released as part of a more than 40-year, \$25 million campaign. The idea was to stock rivers and streams in the Connecticut River Valley with salmon that would migrate to the sea and eventually return and spawn. But very few of the stocked salmon ever made it back. The program's lack of success was evident for years and it was officially canceled in 2012, which might have led to the Kensington hatchery closure plan.

Connecticut officials, however, have continued to raise Atlantic salmon at Kensington and release about 1,200 of the fish each year into the Naugatuck and Shetucket Rivers for recreational fishermen to catch.

"It's highly popular," said Peter Aarrestad, director of DEEP's inland fisheries unit. Hyatt added that these Connecticut rivers are the only places in southern New England where "anglers can go out and go after these fish."

DEEP officials said the Kensington operation — which is the only state hatchery producing Atlantic salmon for release into state waters and salmon eggs for use in Connecticut schools — costs just under \$500,000 a year to run. Burlington hatchery expenses are slightly more than \$840,000 annually. Quinebaug is the state's largest fish hatchery and it costs about \$1.9 million a year.

Burlington is Connecticut's oldest state hatchery, having opened in 1923. The Kensington hatchery came next in 1934, and Quinebaug was built in 1971.

Kokanee

The Burlington hatchery also raises a breed of freshwater salmon called "Kokanee," which are stocked in Lake Wononskopomuc and East Twin Lake in Salisbury, and in Barkhamsted's West Hill Pond.

The salmon, Northern pike, walleye and catfish that are raised at state hatcheries are really only sidelights to the state's largest and oldest fish-raising operation — trout.

More than 600,000 brown, rainbow and seeforellen trout are released into Connecticut waters each year.

Hyatt said that state revenue from trout fishing licenses each year averages more than \$2.8 million.

Last week, Sonski and another hatchery worker were taking eggs from a massive 15-pound seeforellen trout before their scheduled release into special "trout management" areas. The fertilized eggs are then placed in special "incubators" filled with trays where the eggs are bathed in constantly running water kept cold enough for the fish to develop properly.

Some of the eggs from Kensington are donated to "Trout in the Schools" and "Salmon in the Schools" programs. Albrecht said there are now about 120 aquariums in 60 different Connecticut schools where students watch those eggs transform into fish that will eventually be placed in ponds and streams.

When the eggs hatch in the state incubators and the tiny "fry" are large enough, they are transferred to hatchery ponds, some of which are covered while others are open to the air.

Those open-air ponds are the ones where the state has trouble with natural predators. Sonski estimates that he loses something like 10,000 fish of various sizes to kingfishers, osprey, eagles and herons. "The Great Blue herons are the worst," he said.

Aarrestad said that fisheries experts are trying to reduce those predatory losses through netting and constructing certain types of walls around ponds. He said those walls will make it tougher for wading birds like the herons to stand close enough to the water to "gobble up our fish."

Reducing Costs

The hatchery officials, wary of future budget cuts, are making their own efforts to reduce costs.

At Quinebaug, plans are in the works to install high-efficiency pumps and recirculation machines that would reduce the 5,000-gallons-of-water a minute that the hatchery currently pumps out of the ground for its fish ponds. Aarrestad estimates that DEEP might be able to save as much as \$200,000 a year with the improvements.

All of which might help keep the state hatcheries off the Malloy administration's chopping block list.

Casa, the spokesman for Malloy's budget-writing Office of Policy and Management, said his agency's experts "will consider all aspects" of the hatcheries operations when they come up for review, including cost savings and "the revenue a program may bring in."

If the budget-cutting ax does start swinging in the hatcheries' direction, lawmakers can expect another massive lobbying effort to save them, according to Crook, head of the Coalition of Connecticut Sportsmen, and Albrecht.

"The fishermen would be really disturbed," Crook said. Crook said he fully expects another attempt to shut down a hatchery.

Albrecht said that in 2013, "We had every kid [in the trout and salmon school programs] write letters to Hartford, and every parent and every teacher."

Gary Brumett, owner of Connecticut Outfitters in Wethersfield, said any reduction in the fish hatchery and stocking programs "would be tragic."

"We already have tackle shops closing up," he said. Brumett said he could understand if the state decided to privatize the hatcheries in an effort to cut costs, but that simply shutting down the facilities "is a completely different thing."

Sonski is a stocky man with a weather-beaten face and a contagious enthusiasm for fish. He simply can't fathom why state budget-cutters would even consider targeting an operation that continues "to bring money into the state. ... It just doesn't make sense," he said.

"If I sound passionate, it's because this is my life," Sonski said with an apologetic smile. "I would never want to work anywhere else. I have to do hatchery work. It's my life."

Copyright © 2014, Hartford Courant
