

Connetquot Fish Hatchery to Close for 5 Years

DEC takes action to prevent spread of virus in river

BY BILL BLEYER Article >

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In a move that is stirring controversy in the local angling community, the state will shut down the historic Connetquot State Park Fish Hatchery for at least five years to eradicate a persistent fish virus in the river.

Anglers are split over the Department of Environmental Conservation action.

Some agree it is necessary to keep the virus from spreading to the Carmans and other rivers with natural populations. Others say it is overkill because the disease doesn't affect humans and closing the hatchery will result in fewer fish to catch in the Connetquot.

Built before the park was home to a stately lodge of the South Side Sportsmen's Club visited by presidents, the 144-year-old hatchery has helped make the park a world famous fly fishing site and center of the local fly fishing scene. But it's been shadowed by a fish virus for almost two years.

The state killed thousands of baby trout last year in an unsuccessful attempt to kill off the infectious pancreatic necrosis, which poses no health hazard to humans but can cause widespread mortality among young fish.

So now the DEC will not renew the hatchery's permit, forcing the parks department to close the hatchery by the end of the year. The fish in the ponds around the hatchery will be placed in the river where fishermen could still catch them, and fishermen are being allowed to catch six fish instead of one to reduce the population to help fight the virus.

During the five-year shutdown, the parks agency will clean and disinfect the hatchery while stocking the river with disease-free fish from other hatcheries to allow the virus to die off.

Charles Guthrie, regional DEC freshwater fisheries administrator, said the action is necessary because it would be "catastrophic" if the disease spread to other rivers like the Carmans and resulted in the kind of mortality rate now been experienced at the Connetquot hatchery.

Guthrie said the hatchery needed to be upgraded with the help of an expert consultant or closed for at least five years to make sure the virus had died off.

"A 19th-century hatchery doesn't work in a 21st-century world," Guthrie said.

While officials of the fishing group Trout Unlimited support the DEC action, some fishermen who regularly visit the park object.

Richard Steinberger of Oakdale criticized "this ill-advised and Draconian management 'solution.' Anglers will cease to pay \$20 for four hours of unproductive fishing, revenues to the park will diminish to a trickle, and somebody in Albany is going to suggest the unthinkable: Change the law which established the park preserve in order to address the revenue shortfall by enhancing 'mixed use' recreation: picnic tables, barbecue pits, ballfields or even, God forbid, yet another golf course."