

## New salmon ladder debuts at Fort Peck

By MARK HENCKEL

Gazette Outdoor Editor

FORT PECK - Finding a good, reliable, disease-free source of chinook salmon eggs has always been a problem for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologists.

Some years, there are plenty of salmon to stock. In other years, there's just a few.

So FWP placed a salmon ladder near the boat ramp at Marina Bay on Fort Peck Reservoir last week.

Just like salmon running up a river, chinooks will seek out moving water in a reservoir and swim up it.

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This moving water, however, will be pulled out of Fort Peck with a tractor, powering a pump, running water down a 4-foot-wide, 40-foot-long culvert into Marina Bay.

Mike Ruggles and his FWP fisheries crew at Fort Peck built the salmon ladder, complete with four baffles inside to create stair steps for the fish to move up. Fish will drop into a stock tank, then go back down a pipe into a holding pen in the bay.

"The Glasgow Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited was the key," Ruggles said. "They donated \$2,500 to help us buy the tractor, adding to the \$5,000 the department came up with. We're very thankful for that. If they wouldn't have provided the \$2,500, we wouldn't have gotten the tractor."

FWP also provided \$2,500 for the culvert and stock tank. The pump came from the state's Miles City Fish Hatchery.

"The culvert is on wheels - Jeff, B.J. and I built it - so that when we're done, we can lift it up, put the tires back on, pull it out of there and park it until next year," he said.

"We hope to have the salmon ladder all put together and running by Monday," Ruggles added. "We'll also be putting in our holding pens and setting up Merwin traps to catch salmon."

Ruggles said Montana works with North and South Dakota to fulfill the chinook salmon needs of the three states each year. All three states have disease-free salmon.

Between the three states, they have used trap nets, electrofishing and salmon

ladders to gather enough salmon to take eggs and fertilize them.

"The good thing about a salmon ladder is that most of the fish that move up the ladder are in spawning condition," he said. "When you trap them, or electrofish them, you can get eggs that are past their prime or fish that aren't quite ready yet. With salmon that are in spawning condition, you get a better return on the eggs you take."

Ruggles also said that when these ladders work - sometimes they really work.

"Last year, we had a couple hundred salmon move up North Dakota's ladder in about a half-hour," he said. "So when conditions are right and the fish are good, they can move in a hurry. More typically, you see about 30 to 50 fish per night. In the mornings, we go to the holding pens and sort fish."

He said the goal for FWP is to get enough eggs to stock 200,000 to 300,000 chinook salmon in Fort Peck next year. To do that, they'll need to gather about 450,000 to 510,000 eggs.

"We're looking at bringing in a million eggs between North Dakota, South Dakota and us this year," Ruggles said. "To get a million eggs, we'd need about 550 females - which is a bunch."

Hopefully, the new salmon ladder will help reach that goal.

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