

GF&P to stock more salmon at Lake Oahe

By DORINDA DANIEL, Capital Journal Staff October 09, 2002

A small number of salmon will be stocked in Lake Oahe beginning next spring to help ensure the future of that fishery.

About 15,000 chinook salmon are scheduled to be stocked in Lake Oahe next spring, with another 4,000 stocked next fall.

"Our top priority remains to increase the smelt numbers, but we need to plan ahead to when smelt numbers are good," said Jim Riis, Missouri River fisheries administrator for the S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

When prey fish such as rainbow smelt become more abundant, the intent is to start stocking salmon every year in Lake Oahe, he said.

"While walleyes might be the most-sought-after fish in Lake Oahe, there were a large number of anglers who fished for salmon," Riis said.

In the peak years for salmon fishing of the mid-1990s, from 30,000 to 40,000 salmon were caught yearly in Lake Oahe. Salmon were second to walleyes as the most harvested fish species in Lake Oahe.

The typical life cycle of a salmon is three to four years. At the end of the life span, they enter Whitlock Bay spawning station near Gettysburg to spawn and die. The eggs collected this year at the spawning station will be reared at state fish hatcheries and stocked in Lake Oahe as fingerlings next year. Those salmon will be a source of eggs, probably beginning in 2006, according to Bob Hanten, a coldwater fisheries biologist for the GF&P.

The salmon-stocking program in Lake Oahe began in 1982. Salmon eggs were obtained from the Great Lakes and West Coast to start the program. Eggs were collected from Lake Oahe salmon runs, raised at South Dakota fish hatcheries and stocked back in Lake Oahe as fingerlings. Salmon are unable to reproduce naturally in the reservoir and return to the spawning station to spawn.

Salmon were last stocked in Lake Oahe in 2000. The number of rainbow smelt in Lake Oahe, the primary food source for walleyes and other predator fish, declined greatly in the late 1990s. To help the number of rainbow smelt increase, anglers were encouraged to harvest predator fish. Stocking salmon was stopped because fisheries officials decided it would be contrary to the goal of helping increase the number of smelt.

The last two year classes of salmon in Lake Oahe are making their way to their final destination of the Whitlock Bay spawning station.

"So what we're working off of is salmon stocked in 1999 or 2000. Next year, on paper, we'll have one four-year-class of salmon to return to the station and nothing coming up behind that," Hanten said.

The Whitlock Bay spawning station opened for the season last week. More than 100 salmon came up the spawning station's fish ladder and into concrete holding ponds in one day after the station's pumps were turned on.

A fish that set a new state record for chinook salmon was caught at Whitlock Bay. The salmon weighed 21 pounds, 2 ounces.

The peak of the run typically starts about Oct. 18, Hanten said.

If salmon are not restocked in Lake Oahe from eggs taken from the two remaining year classes, there might not be a salmon egg source in Lake Oahe after the fall of 2003, Hanten said.

There are only three disease-free chinook salmon populations known to exist in the lower 48 states. They are Lake Oahe, Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota and Fort Peck Lake in Montana.

If a disease developed among salmon in North Dakota and Montana, and South Dakota was not able to import salmon eggs from those two states, it could mean the loss of the chinook salmon population in Lake Oahe, Hanten said. Also, salmon egg collections might not be successful in Montana or North Dakota. The Fort Peck Lake salmon population, built from South Dakota and North Dakota stock, is not solidly established and is not a proven source of salmon eggs.

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