

News media:

For additional information, contact Larry Miller at 717-705-7838

Fishery biologists have big dreams for Susquehanna River fish

The dreams are ambitious: 2 million American shad and 5 million river herring spawning in the Susquehanna River above York Haven Dam, and increased habitat access and production for other migratory fish species.

With stocks of American shad and river herring at historic lows, fishery biologists know that decisive action is needed to achieve the goals. Each year, fewer than 3,000 spawning American shad make it above the York Haven dam, just 55 miles from the mouth of the Susquehanna. Although these fish travel thousands miles along the Atlantic coast as juveniles, these 55 miles are the most challenging in their quest to spawn and sustain Susquehanna River fish, according to Larry Miller of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Mid-Atlantic Fishery Resources Office.

Atlantic sturgeon, American eel and other coastal migratory fish are equally in trouble, Miller said. For the past four years, the Service, in cooperation with the owner of the Conowingo Dam and the states of Maryland and Pennsylvania, has trapped up to tens of thousands of immature American eels below the dam at mile 10 and transported them above the Holtwood (mile 25), Safe Harbor (mile 32) and York Haven dams. Without this assistance, no eels make the journey from the ocean upriver to their freshwater nursery habitat. After these eels mature, they travel back downstream to the Atlantic Ocean to spawn and continue the cycle of life.

Biologists are reinvigorating efforts to restore an abundance of migratory fish to the Susquehanna River Basin. Plans include restoring adequate access for fish to and from their historic river habitat by improving upstream and downstream fish passage at the four hydroelectric dams on the lower river and at more dams on the river and major tributary streams. Biologists will examine fish survival during downstream passage and ensure that it is safe and effective.

As part of an effort to increase the number of juvenile shad the Susquehanna produces, the Service and its partner agencies take eggs from fish returning to the Conowingo Dam or from other rivers. These eggs are transported to the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Van Dyke Hatchery near Thompsettown, where they are hatched and nurtured until they grow to one-half inch long. Then biologists return the tiny fish to the river system above the dams. The young fish will imprint on the river and attempt to return to the same site as adults to spawn and continue the cycle – if they can make it safely past the dams and all the other obstacles they will encounter.

In all, 43 newly defined tasks will be the steps biologists hope will lead to the dream of abundant, sustainable migratory fish in the Susquehanna.

The Susquehanna River Anadromous Fish Restoration Cooperative approved the Migratory Fish Management and Restoration Plan for the Susquehanna River Basin on Nov. 15, 2010. The Cooperative includes the Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Susquehanna River Basin Commission, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Maryland Department of Natural Resources and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

For more information and the new restoration and management plan, see <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/susquehannariver>

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