

SFR Helps Grow Wisconsin's Wild Rose

By the end of the 1950s, Lake Michigan was known by many local anglers as the "Dead Sea," largely because of the devastating effects of various invasive species on native fish populations. A decade later, Wisconsin's Wild Rose State Fish Hatchery, some 90 miles west of Green Bay, began stocking Pacific strain salmon, and then trout, to help combat the problems associated with sea lamprey and alewives, a herring native to the Atlantic Ocean, among others.

Today, the same facility annually produces 2.2 million trout and salmon that lure some 200,000 anglers to Lake Michigan. It also produces northern pike for stocking throughout the state, as well as the majority of the state's native lake sturgeon and the spotted musky and walleye found in Green Bay and the Fox River.

Purchased by the State of Wisconsin from a fish farmer in 1908, the Wild Rose hatchery was set in a perfect spot, in a valley surrounded by hills bubbling with groundwater. There was no need for pumping water since natural springs and artesian wells fed hatchery tanks and raceways with an abundance of cold, clean water.

Over the years, however, raceways began to deteriorate and the flow and quality of the natural groundwater began to decline, which in turn affected the health of the fish reared on-site. At times, large numbers of fish died due to the poor conditions at Wild Rose. By the end of the 20th Century, it was clear that the entire facility needed some serious attention if it was to be efficient in the 21st.

It is now receiving the attention it needs, thanks to the vision of state fishery managers. In 2003, they identified a \$24.3 million renovation project as the state's highest priority for addressing a growing demand for fishing opportunities, as well as the collaborative funding effort to realize this vision.

An environmental settlement with some of the industrial companies responsible for polluting the Lower Fox River and Green Bay watershed provided a significant portion of the funding. Another significant portion came from the Sport Fish Restoration (SFR) fund, which generates revenue for states through a special excise tax collected on fishing tackle and motorboat fuel.

With funding in place, fisheries staff developed a four-phase plan to address the facility's design, maintenance and construction needs to make it meet environmental laws and reverse declining production. Planning has clearly been long-sighted as it addresses not only the hatchery's ability to increase production but also the health of its fish.

The first phase, which began in 2006, saw the construction of a new building to shelter broodstock, incubate eggs and rear young fish in several new tanks and raceways. The old, failing artesian wells were sealed to protect from groundwater contamination, and new deeper wells were drilled to provide water that is filtered and recirculated throughout the new raceways. Additionally, a visitor's center was built that incorporates four of the facility's historic buildings and tells the important history of the Wild Rose fish hatchery.

A second phase will see the construction of new coolwater incubation and rearing facilities and will include 14 modern rearing ponds for raising pike, sturgeon, walleye and muskie. A new wastewater system has been installed to keep the water discharged from the hatchery into Pine River, a Class 1 trout stream, as clean as possible.

A third phase will restore the wetlands, springs and headwaters of the stream that has been damaged when the hatchery was first built more than 100 years ago.

All told, the renovation project will allow Wild Rose to produce healthier fish and increase coldwater production for trout and salmon by about 15 percent. Also, the hatchery will eventually double its production of coolwater fish like northern pike, musky, sturgeon and walleye. Efforts such as these promise to keep what was once perceived as a “dead” fishery at memory’s distant bay as happy anglers now shell out some \$2.3 billion every year to partake in Wisconsin’s thriving sport fishing industry.