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Subject: : Warm Water & Salt Water Fly-Fishing

Topic: : end of smallmouth on the susquehanna

Re: end of smallmouth on the susquehanna

Author: : Fredrick

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URL:

John Arway fears the smallmouth bass could be the Susquehanna's Andrea Gail.

"Is a perfect storm coming? We think it may be," says the executive director of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission.

The juvenile bass population has essentially crashed.

All that are left are the adults.

"The bass we have left are the ones we have to rely upon to repopulate the river," said Arway.

It takes five or six years for a bass to grow to 15 inches.

And now the adults are getting sick as well: gross lesions; papillomas; bacterial infections that normally wouldn't affect healthy fish; and male fish with female characteristics.

The particular causes of each disease aren't yet known, but the multiple pressures stressing the fish certainly are: low dissolved oxygen levels in the water, high dissolved phosphorus; industrial, agricultural and household contaminants that ultimately wend their way into the river.

"I don't want to be the director when the last bass is caught in the river," says Arway.

And so, for most of the year, he has been waging a campaign to convince the Department of Environmental Protection to declare the middle section of the Susquehanna an impaired waterway.

And thus far, the DEP is not convinced.

In fact, the testy back-and-forth between DEP Secretary Michael Krancer and Arway has at times had the whiff of dueling skunks.

Krancer says - quite emphatically - the science doesn't support the impairment designation.

Arway says Krancer's people aren't looking at the science the right way.

Krancer's people say Arway is making assumptions and extrapolations that aren't supported by the data.

Arway says the preponderance of evidence is quite literally as clear as the lesions on the fish.

The argument has been going on all year.

It took on a different character Tuesday afternoon as Arway teamed up with the National Wildlife Federation, which has hired former PennFuture executive director Jan Jarrett to help, and the two convened a meeting of more than 30 people representing anglers, fishing clubs, guide services, rod and reel stores, outfitters, river keepers, conservationists, scientists and state agencies with jurisdiction over the river.

The goal, Jarrett said, is to create "an organized and persistent voice" to save the river.

It's something the Susquehanna has never had, she said.

The voices around the table were anything but organized at Tuesday's meeting.

But they were persistent, in part because two representatives from DEP were also there.

Rod Kime and Kelly Heffner were peppered with outrage from anglers and outfitters who have seen fish populations plummet.

The regulators kept their game faces on, but offered little to mollify the rest of the table.

To DEP's credit, Kime outlined a program of fairly extensive testing the agency launched this year and said, "We will be doing an equivalent amount of work or more this summer."

Heffner told the group, "We absolutely believe there's something wrong with the fish. We get that. We understand it. But what we are unable to do is say it's this thing that's causing it."

Arway's retort is that DEP has not required specific causation before listing other rivers as impaired.

Kime said such a listing is no quick fix.

"I've been doing these listings since 1998, and no money has ever come with it," he said.

What almost always does come with it, he said, is delay and a legal challenge.

And there's the rub, because - as Kime noted - it's DEP that must defend the listing.

Arway reiterated his request to see the data and analysis upon which DEP's decision not to list the river is based.

He said Krancer promised to share it with him six months ago, and he hasn't seen "a shred" of data from DEP since.

He didn't see any on Tuesday either, and the messages from Kime and Heffner on whether he ever would were mixed.

They walked out of the meeting early; she had to go to another meeting, he said.

"There's obviously a bit of tension between the agencies," said one of the people at the table when they were gone.

The conference room walls resounded with laughter.

The ensuing discussion did not result in an organized voice, but there was general agreement to be persistent and to meet again.

In the river, where the remaining bass still swim, nothing had changed.