
Subject: : Conservation

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Here is an article being run in the Morning Call. I am kinda torn between the two opinions. I for one love the Lehigh and the big water fishing that it presents. I also love wild fish and the creeks they inhabit. I understand the points on both sides of this argument.

Cressleys hope to reopen Kriss Pines hatchery as Firefly
Local couple is meeting resistance from Pa. DEP, Fish and Boat Commission.

Gary Blockus

11:21 p.m. EST, December 24, 2012

Kirk Cressley pointed with dismay to the 14 nearly 100-foot long empty fish pools that he cleaned out by hand shovel and wheelbarrow, a project that took a year to accomplish.

After he and his wife, Denise, bought the former Kriss Pines Trout Hatchery in the Walksville section of rural Lehighton in 2011, Cressley figured he would have the facility up and running by now. Especially after Scott Christman, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's (PFBC) Waterways Conservation Officer for Carbon County, introduced Cressley to the Lehigh River Stocking Association (LRS), which offered to help the couple with the raising and releasing of trout for five years, until the Cressleys could get a good handle on the project.

The Cressleys renamed the facility that runs along Sawmill Run, near its confluence with Berry Run and the Pohopoco Creek, calling it Firefly Trout Hatchery. They planned to fill the 14 pools with approximately 50,000 trout. The LRS was going to use the majority of those trout to supplement its legal-size trout stocking of the Lehigh River in Carbon County.

But instead of now having full fish pools with which to begin trout propagation, the Cressleys have hit an environmental logjam that's going to require a lot of money to leap over; either that or political pressure.

To understand the issue, let's start at the beginning.

The PFBC only stocks fingerling trout, not legal-size trout, in the Lehigh River. The LRS has been stocking

about 12,000 legal-size trout in the river in Carbon and Lehigh counties for more than a decade. According to the LRSA's Matt MacConnell, the group was hoping to raise trout for pennies on the dollar at Firefly and use about 12,000 of the fish to stock the Carbon County portion of the river, and use the normal funds to continue stocking the Lehigh County section.

"I had written a letter to [PFBC executive director John Arway] last January reminding him of the stocking we've been doing on the Lehigh River," MacConnell said. "I was requesting that Fish and Boat [PFBC] fund a way to help us sustain the fishery. With limited resources, we have been carrying the stocking for a fishery that is undeniably productive."

MacConnell explained that Arway wrote back and offered to conduct a feasibility study of the state stocking trout on the Carbon County portion of the river, but not in Lehigh County. Arway knew that the Cressleys were looking to reopen the old Kriss Pines, which is more than 100 years old and at one time was the largest trout hatchery on the East Coast, and thought that perhaps LRSA would be interested in establishing a co-op nursery with the Cressleys. The PFBC said that if the LRSA could get a letter of agreement with the Cressleys, the PFBC would help with supplies.

The agreement was struck, legal papers were signed for the LRSA and Cressleys to do the project as a co-op nursery for five years, and then figurative logs started piling up.

During a routine site inspection of Sawmill Run, the PFBC found brown trout of such size that they were classified as native or wild brown trout, which means the trout were able to propagate on their own. Because of their presence and the quality of water, as determined by Department of Environment tests in 2004 and this year based on testing and invertebrate life, Sawmill Run is in the process of being declared a Class A stream.

While that may sound like tremendous news for Mother Nature, it is most unwelcome news for the Cressleys. The LRSA isn't pleased either.

Because of the stream's high quality status, any effluent, or waste drainage from the hatchery, must be treated before it flows into Sawmill Run, and the budget for such a system to remove the solid waste — mostly fish fecal matter and remnant food — isn't a cost the Cressleys figured on in their business model. The other option, running a drainage pipe into the Pohopoco, which has no such designation, is also cost prohibitive.

The Cressleys, MacConnell and others point out that brown trout are not native to Pennsylvania, and their presence in Sawmill Run is only because they escaped from the hatchery at some point and ended up reproducing in the wild.

State representative Doyle Heffley (R-122) has stepped in offering his services as a go-between with PFBC. He has already held a meeting with PFBC officials and plans to hold more. In addition, the reclassification of Sawmill Run is expected to be voted on by the PFBC board of commissioners during its quarterly meeting in April 2013.

"I think reopening Kriss Pines, or Firefly, is a win-win for everyone," Heffley said. "It's a good idea for the Lehigh River Stocking Association because it will help them put more trout in the river. It's a good idea for the owners because it will help them establish the business. It's good for the economy because it will provide tourism and eventually jobs."

Heffley is against reclassification of Sawmill Run because of the runoff from the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike on one side and the heavily traveled Fairyland Land Road.

Plus, he feels that because the hatchery had been in operation for more than 100 years before the recent

shutdown, it should be grandfathered into an exception to the DEP requirements.

DEP seems intent on holding fast to its standards, however. In an email response to questions posed by The Morning Call, DEP responded, "The facility must reapply for a new permit and satisfy the requirements of our anti-degradation policy."

Grandfathering the hatchery isn't an option, according to the DEP, because "once a discharge ceases [and the permit closes], there is no opportunity for grandfathering."

Heffley blames the current standoff on environmental activists pushing too quickly for anti-pollution laws aimed at industry and drilling, and says that now those same laws are coming back to bite something that would benefit nature and outdoor enjoyment.

"It's a good example of over-regulation," Heffley said. "People want to do the right things without understanding the full meaning of how these regulations change things."

Heffley is looking to gather public comment on the situation, and is asking people in favor of Firefly opening for business to write letters to his office. He plans on using those letters to hopefully wield some influence with PFBC.

Otherwise, a piece of history that began more than a century ago could be lost forever.

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