
Subject: : Conservation

Topic: : Saw Creek Kriss Pines Situation

Re: Saw Creek Kriss Pines Situation

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Another article I found

When everything right seems to go wrong

Saturday, November 17, 2012 Couple's dream of reopening heritage fish hatchery becoming nightmare By AL ZAGOFISKY TN Correspondent azagofsk@ptd.net

For a century, the Kriss Pines Fish Hatchery, once reputed to be the largest on the East coast, stocked the Sawmill Run, and sold fish commercially.

New owners Kirk and Denise Cressley, bought the property at 3585 Fairyland Road in Lehighton, that included a 2-1/2 story 16-room 19th century Victorian farm house that had served as a destination bed and breakfast, and 14 raceways for raising trout. Kirk, an Allentown firefighter who grew up on an adjacent farm, and Denise, who recently retired from the Coast Guard, loved the location and purchased the property to reopen the heritage fish hatchery a place where Kirk worked as a youth.

Kirk and Denise were cleaning and repairing the raceways, where the fish would grow from inch-sized fry to well over a foot in length in 12 to 18 months, when they were approached by an officer.

"He said he was wondering if we would be interested in leasing out the races for a co-op with the Lehigh River Stocking Association," Denise said. "We said 'yes' and he put us in contact with Matt MacConnell, the LRSA president."

The Cressleys owned the property and the LRSA had experience in raising trout, plus the LRSA needed to transfer their stocking program.

"We thought we would gain some experience and they would have the facilities and it would work out for the best for everyone in the local area if we could stock more trout," Denise said. "It was a win-win for everyone."

"The Lehigh River Stocking Association is a nonprofit organization that has been restoring trout fishing in the Lehigh River for the last 21 years," said McConnell. "It has become harder and harder to raise money to buy fish. The fish that we like to stock cost about \$3 to \$5 a piece. We stock about \$20,000 worth of fish a year. That's about all the money we can raise."

"We have been anxious to find ways to get more fish for our dollar," he said. "Officer Christman helped us make connections with the new owners of that facility. Over the last six months, we have worked on an agreement

with the owners, and we applied to the Fish and Boat Commission for a five-year cooperative trout nursery program where we would raise trout at the former Kriss Pine's Hatchery. The new owners are calling it the Firefly Trout Hatchery."

"Together, we think it's a good opportunity for them to learn from our co-op program, partnering with us for five years so they can learn the ropes," McConnell said. "We can benefit for five years raising trout at pennies on the dollar because all we have to do is pay for food. We get fingerlings at no charge from the Fish and Boat Commission."

"We were all excited and the Fish and Boat Commission was on board. They came up to the site and did water testing. The water was excellent quality off the Sawmill Run which flows into the Pohopoco Creek which flows into the Lehigh River."

Everyone seemed happy: the site would maintain its heritage, the Cressley family would get training to start a new business, a significant new business would be a boost to the economy, the LRSA would have mature fish to stock in the Lehigh River, local people and restaurants would be able to buy fresh trout, and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission would make more fish available for anglers.

"Everything seemed very promising and then I get a phone call from Earl Myers with the cooperative program at the Fish and Boat Commission," McConnell said. "It seems that they found wild brown trout in the Sawmill Run in sufficient numbers that they are going to reclassify the creek as a Class A stream, which I understand then gets submitted to the Department of Environmental Protection as a proposed 'exceptional value' waterway. Once it is classified 'exceptional value', operations cannot be introduced that might impair the water quality."

"As part of our normal procedure to bring a prospective co-op into our program, one of the first things we do is a site visit and we take some initial water quality measurements and analysis," Earl Myers said. "We look at the situation, take pictures and look everything over."

"In the process, one of my technicians discovered some brown trout that were not only in the creek, but some looked like they were in the hatchery system. So, I immediately wanted to find out what the situation was as far as the receiving stream, even though it was classified at that time as a cold water migratory fishery stream."

"I wanted to see if there were any surveys that have been done to see if this could be considered for a class A trout stream because if that was the case, then it wouldn't be a good idea to start a whole procedure and find out that it's going to become Class A and then we deal with possible regulations on trying to put a new facility in on a class A wild trout stream. Usually, a class A wild trout stream becomes an 'exceptional value', high quality designation by DEP."

Next, the Commission Area Fisheries Manager came out to the site and determined that there is enough wild trout, in quantity and size in total, to classify it as a Class A wild trout stream.

"That's when I put the brakes on and started talking to my supervisors to find out where we want to go with this," Myers continued. "Right now it is in channels as far as being reclassified. I basically told Matt in our last conversation, to try to find another place to do this."

"A trout hatchery would impair the water quality at some level," said McConnell, who is an environmental engineer. "If you have a trout farm that is discharging into a creek, there will probably be some less than pristine water being discharged-some fish waste and some food that makes it through the settling zone."

From the beginning, McConnell planned to "do everything by the book. World-class, top-notch proper settling zones, proper maintenance, minimal stocking density. We wouldn't overpopulate the hatchery."

If the area of the Sawmill Run at the fish hatchery is rerated and will be required to meet a non-degradation standard, the technology would be so costly that it would be unlikely that the fish hatchery would be reopened.

The Cressleys were devastated. They couldn't believe that this heritage fish hatchery couldn't be reopened because wild brown trout were found in Sawmill Run.

"The hatchery was the very reason that we moved here," Denise said. "This is what we came here to do. Kirk loves the business aspect of it and I love the history aspect of it. I love bringing it back to something that was here before. You will not believe the number of people that stop by and ask about it. Everybody in this area came here as a kid and fished."

From the 1950s until the mid-1990s, the fish hatchery was operated by Joseph and Lillie Kriss as Kriss Pines, and served to stock trout for their pay-to-fish business. After Joseph Kriss passed away, the property was owned by John Fisher, then Bob and Pat Handwerk who operated it as the Arbor Glen bed-and-breakfast, then Danielle Keith who operated it as Whispering Waters bed-and-breakfast. Currently, Kirk and Denise Cressley plan to operate it as Firefly.

In 2004, Nolan Wernett of Sand Spring Trout Hatchery in Jim Thorpe leased the raceways from the Handwerks and operated it as a trout hatchery. When the property was sold to Keith, the lease rate for the raceways was increased to the point where Wernett was forced to cease operations at the site in 2009. The raceways have been idle for three years.

Because the raceways have been idle for three years, it is unlikely that if they reopened they would be allowed to operate as they had in the past. In other words, they are unlikely to be grandfathered into the site.

The Cressley's, McConnell and Wernett all believe that it makes no sense to reclassify portions of the Sawmill Run as "exceptional value".

Here are some reasons:

1. Runoff from both the Pennsylvania Turnpike and Fairyland Road discharges into Sawmill Run.
2. Dams are located upstream of the hatchery property and these dams heat up the water in the summer.
3. The fish that were found in the Sawmill Run were brown trout, a species not native to the United States. The only way that the brown trout could have gotten into Sawmill Run is from the trout nursery when the trout were used to stock the creek during the days when Kriss Pines had a pay-to-fish operation. So the Cressleys wonder how can they be penalized by fish breeding in the creek when the hatchery put the fish in the creek initially.
4. The fish hatchery was operated for a century and only closed for three years. It should have historic standing.
5. The Lehigh River Stocking Association plans to operate it using the best methods that are possible and reasonable but would not be able to meet the requirements of a pristine discharge.

The matter is currently being reviewed by the Pennsylvania Fish and boat commission and they plan to pass their review to DEP.

The Cressley's and the Lehigh River Stocking Association's dream of reopening the heritage fish hatchery is becoming nightmare, and they are hoping to get support to allow them to see their dream come true and open the hatchery, stock the Lehigh River, start a new business, and make fresh local trout available for consumers

