

Fisheries Assessment Begins at Site of Train Derailment

HARRISBURG (July 12) -- The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission has begun a detailed assessment of the damage to fish populations from a recent train derailment and toxic spill in McKean County.

The Commission has been monitoring Sinnemahoning Portage Creek, the Driftwood Branch and Sinnemahoning Creek since June 30 when 29 freight train cars derailed near the town of Gardeau. The accident dumped thousands of gallons of sodium hydroxide – also known as caustic soda or lye – into Portage Run, a highly productive trout stream. Waterways Conservation Officers from McKean and Cameron counties followed the spill downstream and worked throughout the holiday weekend collecting evidence as part of their spill investigation.

As a result of the spill, dead fish were reported up to 35 miles from the original accident site. The damage from the chemical spill was almost immediate and now that it has washed downstream, Commission staff are beginning the painstaking process of estimating the true extent of the damage to fish communities and the resulting lost recreational value. This week biologists began using electrofishing gear to study in detail the affected streams.

Electrofishing is a common fisheries survey process which passes a mild electric current through water, stunning fish so that they can be captured, evaluated and released. The new survey information will be compared to historical and reference site data to determine the scope and extent of the damage.

All types of fish – from top-level predators like bass and trout down through the baitfish and other aquatic life that makes up the food chain – were affected by the spill, as evidenced by the many fish carcasses washed up for miles downstream from the accident site.

“Obviously the impacts to fish and therefore sportfishing are substantial. Our job at this point is to measure the impacts in a deliberate scientific fashion, which will give us the information needed for both recovering damages and future fisheries management decisions,” said PFBC Executive Director Doug Austen.

Austen said that given the volume and nature of the spilled chemical, commonly used in household products such as drain cleaners, it’s likely all fish in Sinnemahoning Portage Creek downstream of the spill site were killed. Four miles of that stream were considered Class A Wild Trout Waters. Waters earn that designation because of the high levels of naturally reproducing trout found there and the PFBC manages them specifically for wild trout.

Another six miles of Portage Creek affected by the pollution is traditionally augmented with stocked trout. The stream flows into the 20-mile-long Driftwood Branch and then eventually into Sinnemahoning Creek below the town of Driftwood in Cameron County. The PFBC’s survey work is an important step in a process that will enable the Commission to determine how far downstream from the accident site fish populations were negatively impacted and to what extent.

Once accurate assessment data is collected, the Commission will compare the sampling results with historical sampling records from the streams, along with the information on fish population make-up and densities from similar waters called reference streams. That composite will enable the agency to calculate the true extent of the biological and recreational losses.

“In addition to the devastation to the resource itself, there are many anglers who cherished these waters and feel this major fish kill as a very personal loss. They have expressed varying degrees of upset, anger and simply sadness,” said Austen. “While there is little short-term solace, time and some assistance from our biologists and others will enhance the stream recovery. It will take years, but these waters will be special again.”

