

## **Streams recovering from deadly chemical spill**

*Endeavor News Outdoor Writer It* has been a little over nine months since the Norfolk Southern train wreck in Gardeau spilled thousands of gallons of concentrated sodium hydroxide

into the Sinnemahoning Portage Creek.

The resulting pollution killed fish and destroyed populations of smaller organisms in the food chain on the Portage Creek and along much of the Driftwood Branch.

Based on the stream data collected in recent months, the Pa. Fish and Boat Commission decided to stock trout this spring in both of these streams. However, many anglers have questions about the fishing conditions.

Although it will be a long time before these streams completely recover, anglers hoping to fish the Portage Creek and Driftwood Branch for stocked trout this spring do not need to alter their plans.

Meanwhile, on the Class A Wild Trout section of the Portage Creek, anglers should be able to catch a few wild trout, but will find nothing like the abundance that was found there before the spill.

When the chemical worked its way through the watershed, the entire food chain was disrupted. In the weeks following, state environmental officials studied the stream bottom to measure the populations of species such as mayflies, stoneflies, crayfish, and others.

While the aquatic bug life on the Driftwood Branch was not affected too much by the high pH, the situation on the Portage Creek - where the chemicals were more concentrated - was a different story. Species were

completely wiped out on the upper Portage. Only a few of the most pollution-tolerant organisms survived on the lower reaches.

Water quality within these streams is normally very good. Thus, once the pH returned to normal, there was nothing preventing fish and other organisms from recolonizing.

Fish naturally migrate, often covering many stream miles. Thus, many aquatic organisms have moved back into the Driftwood Branch and Portage from tributaries and stream sections unaffected by the chemical spill.

Informal surveys conducted this spring by Cameron County Conservation District watershed specialist Todd Deluccia showed dramatic improvement from the postspill findings.

"We found a surprising abundance of sensitive mayfly and stone fly species in the Portage where last summer's surveys showed an absence of insect life," Deluccia reported.

Nevertheless, it will be years before these two streams fully recover. Although the aquatic bug life that is a staple in the food chain has begun to bounce back, it will take several years before populations of baitfish species, wild trout, and smallmouth bass, return to normal.

On the Class A Wild Trout section of the Portage Creek, it will be years before the trout populations regain their natural numbers and age class structure.

Farther downstream on the stocked trout section of the Portage Creek, anglers will encounter the same quality trout fishing that they have experienced in previous years. Most fly hatches will be present in the stream, but some will take a few years to build up to their previous intensities.

On the Driftwood Branch, fishermen should encounter the same insect hatch conditions as in previous years. Trout will also be as abundant as in previous years, since the stocking truck dictates this stream's trout populations. However, the smallmouth bass fishery on this stream will be depressed for some time. Populations of larger, older smallmouth bass don't grow overnight.

Many chemicals build up in the food chain and leave long lasting devastation in their wake. Fortunately, sodium hydroxide does not.