SENATE FISH AND GAME
EXHIBIT NO. 2
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BILL NO. SB 298

Senate Bill 298
February 1, 2005
Presented by Chris Smith
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

Six years ago the Legislature passed House Bill 20 to establish the Fort Peck multi-species fish hatchery. The main impetus behind the legislation was a group of anglers in the Glasgow area. Construction of the Ft. Peck hatchery will be complete in the fall of 2005. This is a remarkably short time to go from concept to completed construction. The Glasgow area anglers, Fish, Wildlife & Parks and especially the Montana Congressional delegation have worked very hard to see this $23 million dollar project through to successful completion for the benefit of Montana anglers.

The hatchery consists of a building that includes egg hatching facilities, a number of raceways and a pallid sturgeon rearing room. On the grounds there are over 40 ponds ranging in size from one-half to two acres for rearing warm water fish including walleye, bass, northern pike, tiger muskie, perch, crappie and channel catfish. The ponds contain over 90% of the rearing capacity (by volume) of the entire hatchery There are also outside raceways.

The operation of this facility for walleye and other warmwater species will extend from March through August. In March we will collect up to 100 million walleye eggs and incubate them in the egg hatching facilities. During April as the eggs are hatching, we will move fry into the ponds to grow. In April we will stock up to 50 million fry in Ft. Peck reservoir. During the rest of the summer through August, we will be raising walleye in the ponds to fingerling (2 inch) and advanced fingerling (2-6") and stocking them out. About 2 million fingerling and 250,000 advanced fingerling will be stocked each year. This same scenario will be followed for the other warm water species (bass, northern pike, tiger muskie, perch, crappie and channel catfish) although at a much smaller scale. Once the ponds are emptied we are done with warm water fish for the year. All this warm water species production will use about 95% of the egg hatching facilities, for less than a month, and none of the raceways located within the building or outside.

The pallid sturgeon will be raised in a specially designed room that is separate and not suitable for raising other species with the exception of paddlefish and shovelnose sturgeon. The pallid sturgeon production space will utilize less than 5% of the hatchery building capacity by volume.

If this legislation were passed as drafted, the rest of hatchery capacity could only be used for Chinook salmon. The number of salmon we could raise with the remaining capacity would be far greater than we could ever utilize. Rather than raise fish we cannot use, much of the hatchery's capabilities will go under utilized. Consequently, hatchery operations would be very inefficient and not realize the full potential of the hatchery for the benefit of Montana anglers.

For example, the lake trout fishery at Ft. Peck Reservoir is a very popular fishery and the anglers that participate are an important part of the Glasgow area economy. There are a number of Montana anglers that would like to see lake trout raised in this hatchery and stocked in the reservoir. While the department has no plans to produce lake trout – or any other species not included on the list of warm water fish – at this time, we believe it would be unwise to foreclose by statute options that the angling public may want us to pursue in the future. The sponsor's amendments address our concerns with the bill as introduced and give the interested parties the flexibility needed to ensure we maximize the return on the significant investment made in this hatchery.

The bill also establishes a permanent list of waters where the warm water stamp will be required if an angler wishes to harvest warm water fish from that lake or reservoir. One amendment to this section references water listed in the 2005-2006 fishing regulations, which will increase the revenue generated to support hatchery operations. The other amendment eliminates the need for rulemaking, which is not necessary since the statute already provides that if fish are planted in a body of water, the warm water stamp is required. FWP will simply add water bodies to the list in the regulations as we plant fish in new bodies of water.

With the sponsor's amendments, FWP can support SB 298.