

1 hatchery bill bad, other needs passing

Two bills to address the funding shortfall for Fort Peck Hatchery have hit the Montana Senate. One is a loser — it needs to be killed because it doesn't solve the problem. The other one needs the support of grassroots Montana fishermen and needs to pass into law.

Here's the background.

The original Fort Peck Hatchery bill was passed into law by the 1999 Legislature as Senate Bill. It authorized the hatchery's construction and created a \$5 warm water fishing stamp, which bill-backers hoped would sufficiently fund the hatchery's operations.

The stamp was only required of anglers who kept warm-water fish and, supposedly, was only for waters that were stocked out of Fort Peck Hatchery.

The 2006 Legislature further spelled out the exact list of species that could be raised at the hatchery, notably leaving out all trout and salmon and, perhaps as an oversight, muskellunge.

In the meantime, Fort Peck Hatchery is limping along, running at far less than capacity due to budget constraints and plans to raise just two species — walleyes and chinook salmon.

Steinbeisser's bill

Sen. Donald Steinbeisser, R-Sidney, has introduced SB 314. The bill is set for a hearing before the Senate Fish and Game Committee at 3 p.m. Tuesday in Hearing Room 422.

SB 314 would amend the current warm water stamp laws to make it so that anyone fishing waters where the stamp is required would be required to buy the stamp, whether they were fishing for and keeping warm water species or not.

A big flaw in this legislation is that the vast majority of anglers on those waters already buy the stamp. It won't generate much in additional dollars.

But beyond that, the biggest glaring flaw is that all it does is continue the warm water stamp. Revenue from the stamp is going to drop drastically in the next few years if Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks follows the letter of the

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future" out of Fort Peck Hatchery.

Using that criteria, FWP developed a list of 69 waters where the stamp was required by warm-water-species anglers in 2006.

But the truth of the matter is that only 12 waters were stocked out of Fort Peck Hatchery in 2006, its first year of operation. When FWP revisits its regulations, if FWP follows the letter of the law and my guess is that they'll get slapped if they don't, the number of those waters is going to drop drastically — from 69 to somewhere in the neighborhood of 12 — almost all of them stretched across the Hi-Line.

Off the list will be places like Cooney, Bighorn Lake, Tongue River Reservoir, Dailey Lake and Deadman's Basin — waters stocked out of the closer and more logical source, the Miles City Hatchery.

Steinbeisser's bill isn't going to attack the real problem. It isn't going to make the situation better even if Miles City is added to the bill. And with his bill or without it, the funding shortfall is not going to get any better. If it isn't going to help, and may drastically hurt the situation, SB 314 needs to be killed.