

Management plan would protect wild brook trout, enhance fishing opportunities

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By John Hayes / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Brook trout are more than just another catch to clip onto the stringer. Pennsylvania's state fish is the only trout native to its rivers and streams (lake trout are native to Lake Erie and Silver Lake in Susquehanna County). Sensitive to environmental change, the brook trout's presence is a bellwether of water quality, and confirmation of naturally reproducing populations can trigger a series of state and federal actions that protect entire watersheds from some types of industrial use and development.

Much of a new Strategic Plan for Management of Trout Fisheries in Pennsylvania, proposed by the state Fish and Boat Commission, establishes ways to further protect *Salvelinus fontinalis*.

Wildlife management plans establish priorities and propose ways to get things done. The 2020-2024 update of previous trout management plans focuses on goals that were not accomplished and adds new areas of concern. The plan identifies 40 issues and 127 strategies to address those issues. Many of them deal with brook trout and improving the quality of trout fishing in Pennsylvania.

"The goal of this strategic plan is to ensure that adequate protection is afforded to Pennsylvania's wild trout resources, and that fisheries provided through the management of wild trout and stocking of adult and fingerling trout produce high-quality angling opportunities in Pennsylvania," said Fish and Boat spokesman Mike Parker in a statement.

At the top of the list is finding a permanent funding source for the agency's Unassessed Waters Program, a project initiated by Executive Director Tim Schaeffer's predecessor to explore and assess all of the state's 62,725 streams. Approximately 51,800 streams have never been evaluated by Fish and Boat, and about 35,000 of those are at least a half-mile long and more likely to support wild trout. The plan proposes the hiring of one or two fisheries biologist aides to assist in stream assessments by 2021.

Sections of some streams may be capable of supporting wild trout but are inaccurately designated, resulting in the overstocking of hatchery trout, which can push out wild populations.

"There are numerous stream sections that may support Class A wild trout populations which have not been identified and appropriately designated as Class A Wild Trout Streams by the PFBC," states the draft management plan. "This leads to inadequate water quality protection for these streams and inconsistent application of fisheries management strategies."

The plan calls for improvements to Fish and Boat's stocked trout allocation system to improve efficiency, including reducing the number of brook trout raised in state hatcheries. One recommended regulation change would update the definition of a "trophy" trout and permit the harvest of only one trout 18 inches or larger per day in an effort to conserve the larger, more desirable fish.

The plan would also crack down on unauthorized fish stocking, the vector through which many invasive plant and animal species spread among waterways. A stocking permit documenting the absence of invasives would be required every time fish are put into a Pennsylvania waterway.

Improved public access to priority stocked trout streams would be addressed in the draft trout management plan. A statewide stocked-trout angler survey would assess angler catch, harvest rate, preferences and opinions to inform future programs and regulations. The last statewide trout fishing survey was conducted in 2005.

The plan is available for public review [online](#) at the PFBC website (www.fishandboat.com). A 30-day public comment period will be open May 26-June 24. Comments can be submitted through a digital [comment portal](#) or mailed to PFBC, Attention: David Nihart, 595 East Rolling Ridge Drive, Bellefonte, PA 16823.

Shooting ranges

The Pennsylvania Game Commission has reopened all of its shooting ranges on state game lands. The ranges were closed as a COVID-19 precaution and reopened incrementally as restrictions were upgraded. State game land rifle, shotgun, pistol and archery ranges are now open during regular hours of operation. Use requires a valid Pennsylvania hunting or fur-taker license, or a shooting range permit available through the game commission.

