

(Note: This is wildlife news from DWR, 6-4-08.)

Walleye Discovered in Red Fleet Reservoir

Illegal introduction could ruin the fishery

Vernal -- Walleye were recently discovered in Red Fleet Reservoir, the Division of Wildlife Resources announced June 4.

Red Fleet Reservoir is just northeast of Vernal.

The fish were collected May 29 during routine gill net surveys. They represent the latest example in a growing epidemic of illegal fish introductions in Utah.

“A total of 22 walleye were collected in two of three nets,” says Ed Johnson, regional fisheries biologist for the DWR. “This is surprising considering no walleye were collected during the previous five years of standard sampling.”

A walleye was captured in a Red Fleet gill net six years ago. Later that summer, a Utah State Parks officer recovered another walleye that was caught by an angler. Because no walleye were collected during subsequent years, officials hoped the 2002 incidents represented a failed introduction. Unfortunately that wasn't the case.

“The walleye collected last week were two different sizes, representing two distinct age classes,” Johnson says. “Clearly these fish have been in the reservoir for several years and have successfully reproduced.”

This illegal introduction greatly concerns wildlife managers.

“Walleye are efficient predators”, says Roger Schneidervin, regional aquatics manager for the DWR. “Walleye will significantly impact rainbow trout, largemouth bass and bluegill within the fishery. Because Red Fleet is not a

particularly productive reservoir, it's likely these populations will crash. The end result could be a marginal boom and bust walleye fishery similar to that found in other Western reservoirs."

And potential impacts extend beyond Red Fleet. "Some walleye already make their way into the middle Green River, where they negatively impact native fish populations, including endangered Colorado pikeminnow and razorback suckers," Schneidervin says. "A large walleye population in Red Fleet Reservoir represents an added threat just upstream of critical native fish spawning and rearing habitat.

"We're also concerned about the close proximity of Red Fleet to Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Walleye would be a disaster in that predator-rich fishery that already faces the threat of burbot, another recent illegal introduction."

In the short term, DWR officials will request an emergency order that would establish no limit on walleye in Red Fleet and require anglers to kill any walleye they catch. Identical regulations are already in place for burbot at Flaming Gorge and smallmouth bass in the Green River, where the later species seriously impacts native fish populations.

In the long term, biologists will investigate the feasibility of chemically treating the reservoir to try and remove walleye. "Treating a reservoir of this size is expensive and also is complicated by the fact that Red Fleet Reservoir provides culinary water to the Vernal area," Schneidervin says. "On the other hand, we simply will not accept and manage a fish species that some irresponsible individual has illegally introduced. It's difficult to emphasize just how much damage an illegal introduction can cause to a fishery or an entire aquatic ecosystem for that matter. The monetary cost and lost fishing opportunities are going to be felt by anglers and taxpayers alike."

Reward offered

“I am very displeased with yet another illegal introduction of fish into a good trout/bass water,” says Walt Donaldson, Aquatics Section chief for the DWR. “Utah’s anglers suffer the consequences of these ill-conceived and selfish actions.”

Donaldson and his staff have already contacted the Utah Bass Federation and the Rocky Mountain Anglers regarding this illegal act. They’re as upset as the DWR is.

The Utah Bass Federation has donated \$1,000, Rocky Mountain Anglers has donated \$500 and the DWR has raised an additional \$1,000 from their Help Stop Poaching program as a reward. These monies will be given to individuals who provide information leading to the successful prosecution of the person or persons responsible for this act.

“The DWR and anglers are joining efforts to combat the illegal introduction of invasive species into the state’s fishing waters,” Donaldson says. “Combining our efforts to report these illegal actions is the only way to prevent this in the future.

“We strongly encourage anyone who has information about the illegal introduction of fish into Red Fleet Reservoir or any of Utah’s fishing waters to call the Help Stop Poaching line at 1 (800) 662-DEER (3337).”

For more information, call the DWR’s Northeastern Region office at (435) 781-9453.