

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

The Importance Of Fish Hatcheries In North Dakota



By Doug Leier
Biologist,
North Dakota
Fish & Game

Even now I don't think I fully appreciated what was right in our own backyard. I know back then I certainly didn't.

What I did know is that I loved to fish. I was fascinated by the hatchery setting along the Sheyenne River downstream from Lake Ashtabula and Baldhill Dam. We peeked behind the scenes of biologists and fisheries managers working to grow the next population of pike, walleye and perch for North Dakota.

A short time later I was working a couple different temporary summer positions based out of the same fish hatchery. My fascination and education made me better appreciate the role this hatchery played when the rains came, ending the years-long drought and welcomed the birth of the "good old days" of fishing in North Dakota right before my eyes.

I marveled as the trucks rolled in and out, picking up fingerlings and fry destined for old standbys and some of the up-and-coming fisheries.

A couple years later my station in Kulm saw me actually playing softball on Dia-

mond Field which is now known as Diamond Lake. Dugouts are now boat ramps. It's just part of a marvelous story in the history books of North Dakota fishing and fisheries.

Fast forward to 2024 and one of the two hatcheries – Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery – produced a record of nearly 12 million walleye fingerlings that were released in about 180 lakes across the state.

While there is some natural reproduction going on in North Dakota waters, you could speculate that maybe half of the walleyes caught by anglers over time originated in the hatchery, further solidifying its significance to meeting the expectations of walleye anglers across the state and beyond.

"Even if you were to say half — half that are naturally produced and half came from the hatchery — that's still a crazy contribution from this hatchery," said Jerry Weigel, Department production/development section supervisor, who, along with other Game and Fish personnel, have for years driven about 1,000 miles for every million fingerlings stocked.

With 430-plus managed waters on North Dakota's landscape the request from Game and Fish to raise more and more walleyes keeps increasing, giving hatchery personnel a reason to max out the capacity at the



Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery – produced a record of nearly 12 million walleye fingerlings that were released in about 180 lakes across the state. Photo Credit: Ashley Peterson NDGF

hatchery.

In his 28 years of focusing his efforts on producing walleyes at Garrison Dam, Jerry Tishmack, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries biologist, has raised about 245 million fingerlings, which is equal to 40-plus tons.

During Tishmack's tenure, more walleye fingerlings have been raised and shipped out of the hatchery near Riverdale than any state or province in North America. Knowing that 180 waters were stocked with wall-

eye fingerlings this year alone, Tishmack understands the value that has across a state where walleye is king.

"Think about the economic impact of that. In all reality, the money it does cost the government, federal and state, to raise these 12 million fish to stock in 180 lakes, the economic impact is so much greater," he said.

Learn more here from Ron Wilson's story free in North Dakota Outdoors magazine.

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