

New facilities high-lighted during weir egg-taking

Posted by Justine McGuire on October 9th, 2014



Special education students from the Manistee Intermediate School District make their way toward the deck that overlooks the Little Manistee River Weir on Thursday. (Justine McGuire/News Advocate)

STRONACH — Students of all ages and abilities were able to enjoy the Little Manistee River Weir, and watch the egg-taking process for the first time this season.

On Thursday, Department of Natural Resources staff along with the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the the Alliance for Economic Success held a ribbon-cutting event to celebrate improvements to the facility that make it possible for everyone to enjoy every part of the weir.

“It’s great to have my kids who are wheelchair-bound to be able to come here and enjoy the facility,” said Megan Wilson, special education teacher at the Manistee Intermediate School District (ISD). “With the trails and accessible bathrooms, really, everyone can use it. Whenever they can get up close with nature, see the fish and see their community, that’s great.”

There were two classes consisting of about 20 children from the Manistee ISD at the weir on Thursday, the final egg-taking day of the season. There were also students from Onekama Consolidated Schools and Montague Area Public Schools.

“They were so excited, they wouldn’t stop talking about it,” said Alyse Jacobi, special education teacher at the Manistee ISD.



Onekama Consolidated Schools students watch as Chinook salmon swim up the raceway at the Little Manistee River Weir on Thursday. (Justine McGuire/News Advocate)

ISD students were able to view the weir from the overlook deck, watch the egg-taking inside the facility and go around the building to watch fish swim up the man-made weir river on their way to the building. Sidewalks connect all three areas.

“We can provide accessibility for all to come learn about our resources,” said Jim Dexter, DNR Fisheries Division chief, during the ribbon-cutting. “How cool that you can come here to see, at ground zero, this facility that maintains the salmon and steelhead for the entire state; they all come right from this site. This is really a great project that’s going to provide that accessibility that we want so that people can become stewards of these resources. When you’ve got places like this in Manistee County, and all the great outdoor things you can do here, this is what helps to create quality of life. Great natural resources help drive local economies, and that’s what we are all about.”



A female Chinook salmon's eggs are harvested at the Little Manistee River Weir on Thursday. (Justine McGuire/News Advocate)

Inside the egg-taking facility, DNR workers gathered the eggs and milt of Chinook salmon, and fertilized the eggs with the milt. From there, the fertilized eggs taken on Thursday will be sent to hatching facilities in Illinois.

"The numbers are low this year, but we've had enough fish to meet our egg-take quotas, so it's been adequate," said Scott Heintzelman, technician supervisor with the DNR Fisheries Division.

Fertilized eggs have already been sent to Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery in the Kalamazoo area, Platte River State Fish Hatchery in Honor, Thompson State Fish Hatchery in Manistique County and Indiana. The Michigan quotas have been met, Heintzelman said.

Low numbers were expected, he added

"We had a weak year class of Chinook coming back this year, primarily because the forage base out in Lake Michigan in 2011 was low," he said. "The Chinook that were naturally reproduced or stocked that year didn't survive very well. What's weak this year are the 3-year-old fish. We're working with what we have."

Chinook spend two to three years in Lake Michigan before making their way upstream to spawn. After spawning, the fish die.

At the weir, the fish are dispatched during the egg-taking process, Heintzelman said.



Milt is poured into a bucket of Chinook salmon eggs at the Little Manistee River Weir on Thursday. The fertilized eggs will be shipped to Illinois to hatch. (Justine McGuire/News Advocate)

"We have a contractor that takes the fish and utilizes them," he said. "They're able to sell the carcasses for pet food or human consumption, it just depends on the quality of the fish."

The first step in the weir process is to lower the grates, which stops fish from swimming farther upstream. When there's a large number of fish below the weir, pumps are turned on to fill the facility's ponds and raceway, when that's done the fish are allowed into the raceway, which is their only option to swim farther upstream. Once in the facility, they are sorted into ponds, and then brought inside to take the eggs and milt. At the end of the day, fertilized eggs are shipped out to hatching facilities in the Great Lakes region.

"There's an old saying, 'Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish and eat forever,' but I think even more importantly, teach everyone about the life cycle of these fish, and give them a chance to see it, and they'll be conservationists forever," said Bob Garner, a former board member of the Natural Resources Trust Fund during the ribbon-cutting. "That's what this achieves."