

Great Lakes Basin Report-April 21, 2013

Special Report - Mass marking funding needs

Our Great Lakes mass marking programs using coded wire tags and automated systems has reached a critical stage of funding by the federal government

We need your help to contact your congressman and Senator to assure a permanent source of funding is achieved for this federal program. Hundreds and thousands of letters need to be sent to our leadership ASAP.

Attached is a model letter you can use – or any portion there of – to send to FWS Director Dan Ashe and the folks listed below.

Some support information follows.

Help Prevent the Collapse of the \$7 Billion Fisheries in the Great Lakes- Support the Mass Marking Initiative!

The Great Lakes have been disrupted by fishery failures since the 1960s. If all fish stocked from hatcheries are not mass marked, it could happen again!

By 1960 the world famous Great Lakes fisheries had completely collapsed from overfishing and invasive species. Along with them went the tourist and fishing economies of many lakeside towns. To redevelop the fisheries and economy, the state, tribal and federal agencies stocked salmon and lake trout (over 1.4 billion fish since 1960). This stocking has been successful and has resulted in:

- \$7 billion fishery
- \$12 billion boating industry
- Lakeside communities transformed into high value tourist destinations.

However, even after successful stocking, the thriving salmon fisheries of the mid 1980s underwent an unexpected and substantial decline in angling success and harvest. In 1987 Chinook salmon harvest declined by 95% in the Michigan waters of the Lake Michigan. In Lake Huron, in 2006 Chinook salmon harvest declined by 90%. The root of the problem has been attributed to:

- A scarcity of forage fish for the number of trout and salmon being stocked
- Nutritional stress for the salmon
- Disease induced mortality
- Potential problems with hatchery rearing practices
- Textbook predator-prey imbalance

This is a clear indication that another and possibly greater failure (collapse) is indeed possible...so much so that all Great Lakes fishery agencies recently agreed to the necessity of a mass marking program for all hatchery-reared salmon and trout stocked in to the Great Lakes.

Regional Lake Committees (representing state, tribal, federal, and provincial governments) have concluded that mass marking is essential to the effective management and restoration of the Great Lakes ecosystem, outlined in the Great Lakes fish and Wildlife Restoration Act. Without the program, the Great Lakes could once again face decreasing fishing opportunities due to the threat of a collapse of the forage base, and a protracted program for lake trout restoration.

The agencies that manage these important fisheries now have the challenge to balance the number of salmon and trout they stock with the number of prey available in order to maintain a stable and economically viable fishery. To make things more complicated Chinook salmon now reproduce naturally in all the Great Lakes but it is unknown how many fish are being produced. Until the Great Lakes mass marking program began in 2010, nearly all stocked salmon went into the Great Lakes without a tag or mark, making them indistinguishable from these wild fish and making management decisions very difficult.



What is “mass marking” and what will it do?

Mass marking will place a tag and adipose fin clip on all hatchery fish stocked so natural reproduction can be measured and hatchery stocking can be tailored to the available prey base. It also allows measuring progress toward rehabilitating lake trout – a federal trust species and native predator of the Great Lakes Basin. Tagging all stocked trout and salmon will also allow each agency to measure the biological and economic efficacy of their stocking and hatchery programs. Analyzing the recoveries of specific lots of fish will identify those fish or hatcheries that are contributing to the fisheries.



What is the current status?

- Mass Marking Initiative began 2010.
- Chinook and Lake Trout are being marked
- Steelhead and Coho marking needs to be implemented
- 70% of the capital equipment needs have been purchased.
- A Tag Recovery program needs to be established.

What happens if the mass marking initiative is not funded?

- Managers won't know the difference between stocked and wild fish production (i.e., they won't know what they are managing).
- Managers are likely to overstock the system with hatchery fish, leading to a significant overuse of available prey and an inevitable downward spiral of salmon and trout stocks, which are critical to our fisheries and economy.
- Managers won't be able to measure the progress with rehabilitating the indigenous lake trout (the true native predator that we are trying to restore).
 - In other words, the Great Lakes Region could very well experience another major down turn or even another collapse in our valuable fisheries and local economy.

Why use Federal funding?

The Great Lakes mass marking initiative is a major, new effort to improve fisheries management---one adopted by the eight states, two tribal authorities, Province of Ontario and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. From the start, the initiative was conceived, developed, and advanced by all fourteen agencies....this is not your typical parochial effort as the entire basin will benefit!

This initiative should be federally funded because:

- a) The mass marking initiative is vital to continued interstate commerce.
- b) All agencies agreed to have USFWS manage the program because of its unique ability to deliver basin wide programs.
- c) The Service's ability to deliver the mass marking program has been demonstrated by its high level of performance in the past 2 seasons, where over 17 million fish have been marked and tagged.
- d) The state and tribal agencies are already doing their fair share by rearing salmon and trout, assisting in tag recovery, and managing the fisheries.
- e) The state of New York has purchased equipment and an initial three years of operating money.
- f) The state of Michigan received a grant from the EPA for additional start-up costs. These funds could have been used elsewhere had Michigan not seen the importance of this program.

How can you help?

Please support funding for the Great Lakes Fishery Mass Marking Initiative. This program has an annual operations cost of \$5.2 million.

Congress, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, and the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act have funded the initial program startup and operating cost. Now is the time to institutionalize this vital program and protect this \$7 billion fishery from future collapse with annual operating money for the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Contact the USFWS and congressional leadership to request their support of the mass marking initiative. It is time to fully fund the implementation of this critical program.

Sample letter;

April 21, 2013

Mr. Dan Ashe, Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW, Room 3359
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Ashe;

Your help is needed to permanently fund a critical component and proven key tool for the successful and effective management of our Great Lakes - the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's program of mass marking all stocked salmon and trout in the Great Lakes.. This program provides us with a quality fishery management tool to best manage these lakes for maximum efficiency and sustainability, gauge progress toward native species restoration and maximize the best return on our investment for a sound economy and enhanced tourism.

The current program to mark salmon and trout in the Great Lakes is not sufficient to mark all stocked fish and is temporarily supported through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. We need your help to permanently fund the USFWS with a line item of \$5.5 million for this mass marking program. A similar program is operational in the Pacific Northwest, and a new permanent line item will offer our resource managers the key tool needed to astutely manage the Great Lakes economically with the greatest return on investment. We are asking for your help to assure this line item is included on a permanent basis in this upcoming budget and all future budgets.

The Great Lakes have been disrupted by fishery failures since the 1950s; if all fish stocked from hatcheries are not mass marked (coded wire tagged), it could happen again. There is a clear indication that another and possibly greater failure is indeed possible, so much so that all state and regional agencies recognize the necessity of this mass marking program for all hatchery-reared salmon and trout stocked into the Great Lakes.

The agencies that manage these important fisheries now have the challenge and opportunity to balance the number of salmon they stock with the number of prey available to maintain a stable and economically viable fishery. While state fishery management agencies and the USFWS hatchery program offer the funding and manpower to raise and stock fish and manage this fishery, they need federal assistance with the critical program of mass marking.

Listed below are key benefits of a permanently funded mass marking program to the Great Lakes region and the federal government, as well as important adverse effects from a lack of funding

Benefits of a mass marking program:

- Support and sustain a \$7 billion fishery
- Preservation of a \$12 billion boating industry
- Enhancement of world class coastal and regional tourist destinations
- High-value lakeside communities
- A World-class fishery has replaced Rust Belt with Fun Belt
- Essential to effective resource management
- Essential to restoration of the Great Lakes ecosystem
- Essential to restorations of native lake trout program

- More effectively manage lakes for sustainable carrying capacity
- Natural reproduction of salmon and trout is accurately measured
- Hatchery stocking is tailored to available prey base
- Ability to measures progress toward rehabilitation of native fishes such as lake trout and Atlantic salmon,
- Offers all agencies opportunity to measure biological and economic efficacies of stocking and hatchery programs
- Recovery of specific groups of fish
- Ability to identify strains or hatcheries that contribute to most fisheries and recovery efforts,
- Mass marking is vital to continued interstate commerce
- Enhancement for State and Tribal agencies that do their share by fish rearing, tag recovery and resource management

Without mass marking program capabilities:

Difficulty in effectively managing lakes for effective carrying capacity

Overstocking of the system may occur

Accurate numbers of fish produced through natural reproduction is unknown

Difficulty in effectively balancing predators with available prey

Inability to measure progress of rehabilitation of native fish stocks

Major downturns, or even collapses in the fishery, are often possible

Inefficient management efforts and use of tax dollars

Can we please count on you for your support for this critical program to aide in giving the Great Lakes the financial shot they sorely need?

Sincerely,

Dan Thomas, President
Great Lakes Sport Fishing Council

CC:
Senator Carl Levin
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Congressman John Dingell
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