



BENEFITS OF HATCHERY FISH AS A SOURCE OF FOOD

In the development of its *Scientific Framework for the Artificial Propagation of Salmon and Steelhead*, the Hatchery Scientific Review Group recognized that hatcheries will likely experience more frequent large surpluses of returning adults because of increased protection of co-mingled natural stocks. Because of this, it is important for the hatchery operators and fishery managers to devise creative solutions for providing harvest opportunities, and to use surplus returns in ways that provide additional benefits from the hatchery programs.

One creative use of hatchery surplus fish is as a source of food. Historically, a small portion of fish returning to state hatcheries has been used as food for state institutions or distributed to tribes for subsistence purposes. The majority has been sold to buyers who use the carcasses primarily for products such as fish meal for pet food. Tribal hatcheries have generally been the exception to this rule. Most tribal hatcheries have considered distribution of salmon to tribal members as the preferred use of this resource. Some, like the Nisqually and Skokomish tribes, have expanded their distribution system to include charitable organizations, food banks and even members of the general public that visit the hatchery on spawning days specifically to pick up fish to be used for food. In the last ten years, the Nisqually Tribe alone has distributed an average of 70,000 pounds of hatchery returns annually for use as food (Bill St. Jean, Nisqually Indian Tribe and Dave Herrera, Skokomish Indian Tribe, personal communications).

In the past few years, the State of Washington has also recognized the value of fish returning to hatcheries as a food source. Under state law, the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has the authority to donate hatchery returns, as excess state property, to needy citizens of the state. Current recipients of hatchery fish include 40 different organizations ranging from small groups such as senior centers, Salvation Army branches, churches and gleaning organizations that receive from 10–200 fish per visit, to a large, statewide distribution network that has an outlet in every county of the state.

The small organizations arrange to pick up hatchery adults from a specific hatchery in their area and handle the processing and distribution to their organization themselves. In the case of the statewide network, a contracted processor picks up the hatchery adults, processes and freezes them as skinless fillets, and distributes them statewide through Seattle First Harvest. In order to defray his cost, the processor keeps the by-products: skeletal remains, skin, and eggs (which are used for fish meal), bait eggs and caviar.

In the first year of operation (2000), this program took 30,000 pounds of hatchery adults and distributed them as food. In 2001, 450,000 pounds of fish were used to produce fillets. Projections for 2002 were for 1.5–2.0 million pounds of fish to be used to produce 500,000–700,000 pounds of frozen skinless fillets; the equivalent of 2.0–2.8 million servings of protein. Because of the success of this program, providing hatchery fish to feed needy residents is now a high priority for good quality fish, second only to meeting the needs of the hatchery program and providing fish for natural spawning areas (Andy Appleby, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, personal communication).



In 2002, the State of Oregon placed a higher priority on using surplus hatchery adults as a food source. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has made arrangements with the same processor used by WDFW. In exchange for the right to process and sell the by-products, fish are processed into skinless fillets and distributed frozen by the Oregon Food Bank. Projections for the 2002 contribution from Oregon hatcheries were similar to Washington's—approximately 140,000 fish to be processed into 500,000 pounds of food (Bill Otto, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, personal communication).