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Galien River fish count planned

**By John Gunner Gooch
For the News**

HARBERT - Efforts are underway to determine just how many fish call the local waters of the Galien River and its tributaries home.

Brian Gunderman of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources outlined the state agency's plans to conduct a federally funded Galien River Fish Survey in 2010 for the 25 people who attended the Galien River Steering Committee meeting held Nov. 16 at the Chikaming Township Center.

Gunderman said a new fish survey for the river and its tributaries would give the Department of Natural Resources a better idea of how their fish stocking program is working in the Galien River Watershed. If results indicate the stocking efforts aren't producing the desired results, he said state officials could come up with ways to tweak what they were doing to make improvements.

"Our annual fish stocking efforts here are quite sizable, and they consist of a Great Lakes Program and an Inland Program," Gunderman said.

In the Great Lakes Program, fish are stocked into the Galien at the Red Arrow Highway bridge that spans the river in New Buffalo Township, and each year these are the species of fish and numbers that are introduced at that site: 15,000 yearling brown trout, 25,000 yearling coho salmon, 12,000 yearling rainbow trout, and 10,000 spring fingerling walleye. In addition, 20,000 yearling lake trout are released at the mouth of the Galien River in New Buffalo.

Gunderman said the Department of Natural Resources' local Inland Program consists of planting 1,200 yearling brown trout at each of two sites: at the South Branch of the Galien at Forest Lawn Road, and in Spring Creek at Martin Road.

Gunderman went on to review past fish surveys the MDNR has done locally, and he reported that creel surveys done at the mouth of the Galien River in New Buffalo have indicated the presence of many major species, including coho and chinook salmon; brown, lake and rainbow trout; yellow perch; and a few walleyes.

"In August 1992 the lower mainstem of the Galien in the vicinity of Red Arrow Highway both above and below the Galien River Sanitary District's wastewater treatment plant was surveyed, and the count above the plant showed 12 species of fish present in those sections, including brown and rainbow trout, northern pike and largemouth bass," Gunderman said.



Below the wastewater treatment plant, eight different species were counted, including brown trout, northern pike, largemouth bass and walleye. He said an August 1976 survey of the "Middle Mainstem of the Galien River" at Glendora Road identified eight species including small bluegill and pumpkinseed.

"That section was tough to sample because it was too deep to wade, and too small to use a boomshocker that's a tool used to shock the fish and bring them to the surface so they can be counted," Gunderman noted.

During that same time period, the Upper Mainstem was also surveyed at five sites, from Kaiser Road to Second Street. Eight species, including bluegill, were found there. The Upper Mainstem was also surveyed in 1992 at Pardee and Holden roads, and nine species were counted there, including brown trout and burbot.

A 1987 study of the Lower South Branch was undertaken at U.S. 12 and Kruger Road, and Gunderman said 25 species were counted there, including rainbow trout, Chinook salmon, channel catfish, northern pike, walleye and largemouth bass.

"In July 1999, the Upper South Branch at Forest Lawn Road was a survey site, and the count showed 12 species, including three 7-inch brown trout," he said.

Gunderman said many of the local creeks would also be survey sites if a 2010 fish survey becomes a reality.

In 1999, he said, Spring Creek was surveyed at three different sites, and while no brown trout were counted at the Three Oaks Road or Martin Road locations back then, five browns were among the 12 species counted at Starr Road.

"There were also 12 species noted during surveys of Blue Jay Creek in 1969 and 1976, but no brown trout. However, a 1997 MDEQ (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality) survey at Dowling Creek at U.S. 12 yielded eight species, including 52 small brown trout," he said. "An expansion of trout populations in the Galien River Watershed would be a good indication of improvements in water quality and stream conditions."

Gunderman said he was optimistic that federal funds would be available to allow the MDNR to do a new extensive four-day fish survey of the Galien River and its tributaries sometime next summer.

"A new survey in this area would include qualitative habitat assessment, and the fish collecting would be done with the use of electrofishing gear," he said. "Tentatively, on the first day we'd concentrate our efforts on the Mainstem area in the vicinity of Red Arrow Highway where we need better data because we had a poor catch there in 1992. On the second day, we'd be surveying the South Branch at Forest Lawn Road and Spring Creek at Martin Road to assess the survival and growth rates of the stocked brown trout there. On day three, we'd be working out at Dowling Creek at U.S. 12 and Blue Jay Creek at Log Cabin Road to assess our designations as trout streams. On the final day, we tentatively plan to take a look at the Middle Mainstem at Cleveland Avenue and Minnich Road to assess the trout populations and potential for future stocking there. We

don't have much data for that Minnich Road location, and we'd like to have more."

Gunderman said that local inland anglers could help the department more thoroughly assess local fish populations by letting them know what they've been catching and where they've been catching them at.

"Prior to the survey we'd be interested in finding out what the wading conditions are, especially in the Middle Mainstem areas of the river," he said. "We use chest waders, but in places it gets too deep to be able to do that, but in those same places the waterway may be too narrow to use a boat or small barge. We may also be looking for volunteers to assist us with this new fish sampling."

Gunderman said it's believed there's been some natural repopulation of brown trout in Dowling Creek, as well as in the upper part of Spring Creek, so he said it will be interesting to see if a new fish survey confirms that.

Marcy Colclough of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission noted during her presentation on Nov. 16 that a high percentage of respondents to a recent Galien Watershed Survey indicated that they enjoyed living in the vicinity of the Galien River because of its scenic beauty as well as the recreational opportunities it afforded, including fishing, kayaking and canoeing.

Berrien County Drain Commissioner Roger Zilke reported on the near completion of the Close Drain project, and he said that he and some workers had spotted a large number of channel catfish in the vicinity of Elm Valley Road.

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