

Friends of the Upper Delaware River

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Hot Water Conditions Display Fatal Flaws In Delaware River Water Release Plan

Unprecedented warm water temperatures on the upper Delaware River this summer prove that the current river management plan does not work and must be revised, according to a nonprofit conservation group.

“The water bureaucrats will try to blame the weather,” said Dan Plummer, board chairman of Friends of the Upper Delaware River. “But after a wet and chilly spring and early summer, river temperatures reached a crisis level after just a few days of above-average temperatures. That points to mismanagement.”

FUDR says the hot water temperatures have placed fish, aquatic insects and the general well-being of the river system at peril due to insufficient cold-water releases from the region’s reservoirs. Water temperatures have consistently exceeded 80 degrees during July on the main stem of the Delaware at Callicoon, N.Y., where fishing traditionally has been great this time of year.

“I made a living guiding in that part of the river for years,” said Joe Demalderis, the 2010 Orvis Guide of the Year. “That stretch is lost to fishing under the release plan. The fish need cold water, and 80 degrees won’t cut it.”

Water temperatures are based largely on the volume of cold-water releases from the bottom of reservoirs, and protocols for the rates of release are spelled out in the so-called Flexible Flow Management Program, approved in 2007 by the multi-state water bureaucracy.

Longtime river observers, including a number of respected guides and the likes of FUDR board member Al Caucci, say the FFMP does not satisfy the needs of the fishery. FUDR has long advocated for a minimum

release of 600 cubic feet per second from the Cannonsville Reservoir on the West Branch of the Delaware from April through September.

In recent weeks, vast numbers of dead fish—mainly white suckers but including some trout and American shad—have been observed in the river. Incredibly, some have publicly touted this as an example of the effectiveness of the FFMP--fish are dying, they say, but only bottom-feeding suckers.

It's an absurd spin on a crisis, said Plummer.

"The presence of dead fish, no matter the species, is a clear sign of an emergency," he said.

On the first day of summer, FUDR issued a "crisis alert" predicting deadly water temperatures as a result of reservoir releases that had been throttled back to 420 cubic feet per second out of Cannonsville, even though the reservoir was 92 percent full.

The crisis came to pass in early July, when air temperatures reached the mid- and upper 90s as a warm front stalled over the area. Water temperatures in the main stem soon spiked above 80 degrees.

On July 4, after intercession by FUDR, River Master Gary Paulachok recognized the potential crisis and gained approval from the water bureaucracy to increase the flow through an "extraordinary needs" provision of the flow management plan. But here's the catch: the "extraordinary" solution could be used for just three days. After 72 hours of temporary relief for the aquatic life, the Cannonsville release valves were cranked back down.

It was a keystone example of the ineffectiveness of the Flexible Flow Management Program, said Plummer.

On July 9, as the extra water was ending--despite reservoirs at nearly 90 percent of capacity--Plummer donned scuba gear and spent four hours surveying the fish in a pool near the Buckingham Access, fewer than 4 miles downstream from Hancock near the East-West branch junction. He found hundreds of eels, a handful of bass and a few dying American shad. He did not see a single trout, dead or alive. The water temperature in the pool was a consistent 77 degrees, top to bottom.

Once again, Friends of the Upper Delaware River implores the Delaware River Basin Commission and the water bureaucracy to devise a new water-release agreement that includes a rational emergency response mechanism to deal with inevitable heat crises.

"We all have to face the fact that the current plan is not working," said Plummer. "The inability of the various government entities responsible to respond with a rational, useful solution to the warm July weather makes this painfully obvious, especially to the trout."