

Hatcheries: 'Some of these facilities are approaching 60 or 70 years old'

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For the past few budget cycles, Mitchell Act funding has remained constant. This time, the number could jump from \$16 million up to \$25 million going out the door to operators throughout the Columbia basin, according to James Dixon, of the sustainable fisheries division at National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"If the increase that's been requested sticks, it could be a \$4 (million) to \$9 million increase, depending on how Congress actually specifies what they mean by \$25 million to Mitchell," he said. "Either way, this would be a significant, multiple-million dollar increase."

Historically, the Mitchell Act funded the construction of hatcheries, such as Big Creek. Now, the vast majority of Mitchell Act funding goes to production, which leaves little for maintenance.

"Some of these facilities are approaching 60 or 70 years old, and while there's been replacement and maintenance enough to keep the lights on, keep the water flowing and keep the fish in the ponds, that's not optimum in a lot of cases," Dixon said. "Big portions of the facilities are due either for complete renovations or rebuilds."

"This isn't the kind of money that can do that," he clarified. "I think adequately addressing the maintenance issues would take years of successive, large additional funding."

Basically, he said, hatcheries have been perpetually underfunded.

Small details

On the ground at Big Creek, one of the two hatcheries funded by the Mitchell Act in Clatsop County, the season is off to a strong start. Coho and Chinook salmon have come back up the ladder, thousands of new salmon eggs are incubated every day and they're on track to meet their production goals. To the unassuming eye, the hatchery seems to run smoothly.

But small details cause big problems for fish production.

Large, concrete ponds hold millions of salmon on the property, and that concrete has been corroded by decades of use.

"The pond walls, there's no slurry on the top," Ross McDorman, a senior fish and wildlife technician at Big Creek, said. "It's all aggregate that's exposed now."

Securing funding to begin repairing the concrete pools is necessary, McDorman said. When the fish enter the ponds, they're roughly a centimeter long, or shorter, which means even the smallest cracks in the concrete can cause problems.

"Any crack that's this big or bigger," he said, holding his fingers about a centime-



Ross McDorman is a senior fish and wildlife technician at the Big Creek Hatchery.

Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



After salmon eggs are spawned, they are released into larger ponds outdoors to grow. Over the course of decades, the concrete walls and flooring has corroded.

ter apart, "we could potentially lose fish in. Hundreds of fish could potentially be lost to that crack."

Some of the concrete was coated about five years ago, but there's more work to be done.

"The concrete is really important. It's really the structure that we use to raise fish," Scott Patterson, the fish propagation manager at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said. "It's kind of like the gas to the car. If you don't have any gas, you might have a nice car but it doesn't go anywhere."

Money needed

But before the improvements can be seriously considered, the funding has to come.

The hatcheries have received the same amount of funding for the past five years, which means there isn't enough money for everything that needs to be addressed, according to Patterson.

"It's really hard to maintain the program's production, staff, maintenance at the level it needs to be," he said. "If we still operate in the same level for the next couple budget cycles, we'd probably be looking at reduced production to our fish."

The situation is similar at Klaskanine, another Clatsop hatchery funded by the Mitchell Act.

"Right now, we're just in a place where our federal budget is not really adequate," Patterson said.

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Philip Mote is vice provost and dean of the Graduate School and remains active in the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute (OCCRI) and the NOAA-funded Climate Impacts Research Consortium (CIRC) for the Northwest. He is very active in leadership of the 60,000-member American Geophysical Union, as President of Global Environmental Change, member of the Council, Vice Chair of the Council Leadership Team, and a member of the Board.

Philip was the founding director (2009-19) of OCCRI and remains involved in communicating climate science within Oregon.

He earned a B.A. in Physics from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in Atmospheric Sciences from the University of Washington.

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