

Operation Fish Lift

By State Game Commission Staff

Most Oregon anglers are quite familiar with normal fish stocking operations and have probably observed many times a big liberation tank truck roll up to a river bank or lake shore and discharge perhaps a half a ton of trout. Or it may have been a planting boat as it first takes on its load from a tank truck, then sweeps down-river unloading trout cargo as it goes.

In fact, it is rumored that some anglers are in-trepid lib truck or planting boat "chasers", following the loads to the release site to get in on ground-floor angling. And sometimes it pays dividends in quick limits of trout, but fish being what they are, the chasing may also be about as fruitless as a bait dunker trying his luck in a bathtub.

Aerial Fish Plants

But there's a fascinating kind of fish planting the average angler seldom sees, yet he reaps the rewards year after year in superb angling. This is the high lakes aerial fish plants where automation and airplanes have taken over from the laborious bucket brigade and pack strings of a score of years ago.

Anglers packing into the back country lakes of

the Cascades and Willowa mountains next year will be catching scrappy rainbow trout or eastern brooks, the result of the game commission's aerial fish lift this year which was completed just a week ago. Not that anglers won't catch fish in the high lakes now, for without exception every lake and pothole in the high country that will support fish life has been stocked with fish at one time or another during the years. Some lakes receive stocks of fish every year, while others may be planted anywhere from one to six years apart depending on the size of the lake and the angler pressure.

Glamour and Excitement

Although aerial fish planting is fast and efficient, biologists, especially the old-timers, feel that the glamour and excitement is gone from the challenge of providing a sport fishery in the out-of-the-way places. And there is little doubt that the modern fishery biologist is missing out on a thrilling and challenging experience.

For the day of the pack string in fish planting is past. So, too, is the sweat and toil of juggling heavy cream cans in which the water must be changed at each creek crossing if the loads of fish are to reach their high altitude destination alive. Gone are the long, dusty days on the trail, the grime, the worry and the fun. So, too, is the risk of losing pack horse and fish load on a steep mountain slope, or perhaps a balky mule that decides he likes it better down the mountain than he does up.

Campsite Scene Recalled

There were fried bacon and beans, smelly socks hung on a forked stick to dry, the creak of saddle leather, and the musical tinkling of the bell mare on a frosty morning. There were sweaty men and sweaty horses who aired themselves somewhat in a cold mountain lake in the heat of the day. A week end down the mountain may mean clean garments, a hot bath, and shave—unless trout were waiting and time would not allow.

Perhaps as many lakes were planted then as now, but it was an all-summer job that began with the spring thaw and ended when snow and cold again hit the high country. And each time a cream can of rain-bows or eastern brook trout was dumped into a lake, there was deep satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, as horse wranglers and biologists alike watched the little youngsters swim away into the depths. They'd grow in a year or two and provide even more excitement and satisfaction to a pack-in angler with rod and fly. Then it was down the mountain to reload, only to return again to the next lake, and the next, until blizzards and a lowering snowline called a halt to the high lakes operations.

Aerated Tanks Instead of Cream Cans

But methods change with the times and the aerial fish lift has now replaced the pack string, and test tubes and aerated tanks have pushed the cream cans aside. During this year's aerial fish lift which took nine days of flying time, nearly a million trout were dropped like falling rain into some 250 lakes in the Willowa and Elkhorn mountains of eastern Oregon and along the backbone of the Cascades from Mt. Hood on the north to the Wild Lakes Primitive area on the south.

Operation "fish lift" stemmed from the Hood River airstrip, the Chiloquin airstrip, the Fall River airstrip, and the airstrip at Joseph. Each field is located a short distance or few miles from a game commission hatchery for quickness in the transfer of fish from hatchery to plane. At the Fall River landing, the transfer is made directly from hatchery to plane, while at others the fish are first hauled to the airstrip by tank truck.

Also Golden Trout

Rainbow and eastern brook trout raised at several game commission hatcheries form the bulk of the high lake plants. Cutthroat trout are stocked in a few lakes, and for the angler who likes a trophy fish in the hard-to-get places, the beautiful golden trout is stocked in a few selected lakes at high elevations.

Aerial fish planting began more than a dozen years ago on an experimental basis in an attempt to speed up the high lakes fish plants as well as reduce the manpower required. It has since developed into a fast and efficient method of stocking Oregon's back country waters.

The pilot project was contracted by Sam Whitney's Air Service at Newberg. This year he brought a new aircraft into operation, a Piper Pawnee single-seater, a faster craft modified to hold a five-compartment aerated tank and capable of stocking five lakes on a single flight.



AND AWAY THEY GO—A lever is pulled and trout and water are sluiced from the plane to fall like raindrops into the lake below. Release here was made over upper

Hanks lake, located about one-half mile north of the Taylor Burn rd. a few miles from Little Cultus lake in central Oregon. (Game Commission photo)



MEASURES TROUT—Monty Montgomery, district fishery biologist at Bend, carefully measures fingerling trout from a pond at the game commissions Fall River hatchery. The young trout are then transferred to aerated tanks for an aerial fish lift into Oregon's back country lakes. (Game Commission photo)



SECOND PHASE—Operation aerial fish lift in second phase of transferring fingerling trout from aerated hopper aboard a flat-bed truck into the aerated hoppers aboard the aircraft. (Game Commission photo)

The flight plan for each trip and the allocations for each lake on the flight schedule is prepared well in advance. Large waters such as Marion lake in the Jefferson park country may require the entire pay load, or even two flights, while smaller lakes such as Jern or Mowich in the same area may take only a single tank compartment, or two or more depending on its size and the normal angling pressure.

Aerial fish planting begins at the hatchery when fish to be stocked are seined into a holding pen. From the pen, or from a tank truck previously brought from the hatchery, biologists carefully weigh out the required number of trout for each lake on the flight schedule. These are placed in a five-compartment aerated hopper mounted to a hydraulic lift on the stern of a truck. Each compartment is marked a different color, as are the compartments aboard the plane. Careful timing, essential to the welfare of the fish, completes this work as the plane touches its wheels on the runway.

Aerial Photographs Used

It is then a simple procedure to back the truck against the plane, hoist the tank overhead, and flush fish and water into the corresponding compartments below. The pilot is then instructed on the flight schedule and, for ease in their location, given an aerial photograph and maps of the lakes to be stocked. The time lapse from touchdown to take-off is seldom more than ten minutes.

As he approaches the target area, the pilot locates the lake or lakes from his aerial photographs and makes his run. The dropping of fish is much like skip

bombing practiced extensively during the last war but minus the skip. The center of the lake is the target bullseye.

Accuracy is uncanny, even in a pothole no more than an acre or two in size, as the plane glides in on a shallow run, then up and out as fish and water are released. Often pack-in anglers fishing from a rubber dinghy or pole raft have been surprised to see an airplane bearing in on them and suddenly find themselves sprayed with wriggling fish and some 20 gallons of water.

Aerial fish drops are made at elevations of not less than 100 feet above the water. Elevations under 100 feet may result in injury or death to the fish as their air speed has not been reduced to the normal fall rate by the time they hit the water. Optimum elevation is from 150 to 500 feet. Higher elevations cause no harm, but the accuracy of the drop diminishes as elevations increase above that point.

Entire flights seldom take an hour's flying time from take-off to landing. Most flights are set up on 30 to 45-minute schedules. This gives the one to three-man biological crew time to weigh out allocations for the next flight, load the hopper for transfer, and make other preparations necessary.

Storms or bad air may halt flying operations for a day or two. Early morning is usually the best flying, but if air and weather permit as many as eight to ten flights may be made in a day's time. The entire air lift this year for the stocking of nearly a million trout into 250 back country lakes spanned less than a three-week period.

Mercy Flights' Planes Carry 1,454 Patients in 13 Years

By SANDRA ARANT

Mail Tribune Staff Writer

Thirteen years ago, in the month of August, the idea was conceived for the service of Mercy Flights, Inc., a non-profit air ambulance service.

A fund-raising campaign was begun in the fall of 1949, and continued until December. At that time the first airplane was purchased, and Mercy Flights came into being. Since then a number of planes have been used. There are three in operation now.

Since its establishment, the service has carried 1,454 patients. Of these, the majority have been members of the subscription plan. George Milligan is chairman of the voluntary board of trustees.

Each of the three planes is equipped with stretchers and oxygen, and has ample room for medical equipment. In one recent case, an incubator was carried in the airplane.

About six pilots are available to fly the planes. A list is kept by Mercy Flights, and the corporation calls on whichever pilot is available at the time.

The planes are on call 24 hours a day—seven days a

week. They are available for use in all kinds of missions, including search and rescue, as is illustrated by the case of Fred Hale.

On a December night Hale, a flying service operator in Grants Pass, flew a mission to drop food and supplies to several small communities downstream on the Rogue river. The small towns were isolated by the river, which was at flood stage. Hale did not return, and by nightfall his wife notified the state search and rescue coordinator for the area, Harold Connor. Connor requested Mercy Flights to make a night-time search along the river before an approaching storm reached the area.

Connor and the plane's pilot spotted a fire about 25 miles downstream, near a settlement called Black Bar lodge. The settlement was about 47 miles from Medford—Mercy Flights' base airport.

To check out the fire, thought to be a signal fire, two river guides set out down the Rogue. Their object was to float down to Black Bar, pick up Hale, and continue down the river to civilization. However, it was found that the guides could

only get as far as another isolated lodge, Marial. Word was sent out that Hale was injured, and a U.S. Forest service plane returned to Grants Pass to pick up Dr. B. E. Mikkelsen.

The pilot flew Dr. Mikkelsen as near as possible to Marial, a strip seven miles away. From there the pilot and the doctor hiked back to Marial.

Hale had been injured when his plane was caught in violent turbulence and crashed in the trees behind the lodge. Plans were made by the rescuers to clear an old logging trail to Marial, and bring Hale out with an ambulance and bulldozers.

However, Hale's was not the only case Mercy Flights was handling at the time. Residents of Klamath, Calif., were forced by the flooding Klamath river to evacuate to Crescent City. That city was cut off by swollen rivers and rock slides. It was necessary to carry blankets to the city for use by the extra people in the Crescent City gymnasium shelters. This task was performed by Mercy Flights.

In addition, a young girl in Medford was stricken with polio, and it was neces-

sary to take her to the polio clinic in Eugene. The plane had trouble with wing icing

from the trip and continuing

to its appointed meeting over Marial.

The rescue operations were

going slowly. Hale's rescue by land was proving much too slow, and too expensive.

An Air Force helicopter was brought from McChord field in Tacoma, Wash., to help with the operation.

Dr. Mikkelsen decided that rescue by helicopter would be less harsh on the patient than continuing the ground rescue, so Hale was moved by copter. The entire rescue operation had taken from Saturday, when Hale disappeared, until the following Thursday, when he was finally taken to a Grants Pass hospital.

Other missions have also been performed by Mercy Flights planes. At one time two members of a Boy Scout troop on a hike down the Illinois river canyon fell and were injured. Each had multiple fractures of the arms and legs. The scoutmaster, after examining the boys, sent two others on an 18 mile hike to the Forest service guard station at Agness.

As a result, three Forest Service Smoke Jumpers arrived on the scene, bringing with them collapsible stretchers and medical supplies. The men gave first aid

to the scouts, and then started the trek toward Agness.

This was accomplished partly by land and partly in a small flat bottomed boat floating down the Rogue river.

The Mercy Flights plane picked for the Agness rescue was a "souped up" version of the Twin Cessna "Bamboo Bomber." After some trouble with air turbulence, the pilot succeeded in landing in a cleared area at Agness. After waiting for several hours for the scouts to arrive, the plane, carrying the pilot, the patients, and a good deal of medical equipment, was able with some difficulty to take off. A 30-minute flight brought the boys to Medford.

In still another case, two teen-age boys from Happy Camp, Calif., were injured by shrapnel and burning powder from the explosion of a homemade rocket. This necessitated flying over the Siskiyou mountains to get the boys to medical facilities. To meet the emergency, a plane carrying a nurse and medical supplies flew down the Klamath river.

The two badly injured

boys were treated by a nurse while flying back to Medford. With the pilot, nurse, and both young men in the plane, plus the equipment which had been brought to assist, the plane was so heavy that the boys' mothers could not fly to Medford with them.

The pilot of a light plane offered to fly the mothers to Medford so they would not have to make the four-hour trip by car.

The Mercy Flights plane arrived safely in Medford, and the youths were taken to the hospital by ambulance. Only then was it discovered that the plane carrying the mothers was lost somewhere above the cloud cover. Through the use of a direction finder at the Medford Municipal airport, the plane was directed to a cloud-free airport some 30 miles away. Mercy Flights then sent a plane to bring the mothers on to Medford.

Week in and week out Mercy Flights performs such acts of rescue and medical aid. The flights provide services to all people in need of help. Subscriptions are available to all valley residents.



MERCY FLIGHTS PLANE—One of the three planes owned by Mercy Flights, Inc., is shown at the Medford Municipal airport. This plane, a twin-engine Beechcraft, is the largest owned by the corporation and was purchased only last fall. The planes fly all kinds of missions including search and rescue.