



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
AND MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES  
STOCK STRIPED BASS INTO CHESAPEAKE BAY TRIBUTARIES

Tucked away in a secluded corner of a State park in southern Maryland, the Joseph Manning State Fish Hatchery seems at first glimpse the picture of tranquility. But its idyllic setting belies both the fast-paced activities within its buildings and the facility's current role in the restoration of the striped bass, a prized food and game fish, to the Chesapeake Bay.

The Manning hatchery is the center of a cooperative effort involving the State of Maryland, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Maryland watermen to tag 300,000 striped bass fingerlings and stock them into the Chesapeake Bay.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Maryland's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) entered into a 5-year cooperative agreement in June to assess the benefits of using hatchery-reared fish to supplement natural striped bass reproduction, which has declined severely in the Bay in recent years.

Since mid-November, striped bass fingerlings averaging 6 inches long have been trucked to the Manning facility from six federal fish hatcheries throughout the Southeast and from a special rearing facility operated by the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company. The Manning Hatchery located near Waldorf also raised 100,000 striped bass for release, as it has for several years. The six federal hatcheries -- Frankfort National Fish Hatchery (NFH), Kentucky; McKinney Lake NFH, North Carolina; Harrison Lake NFH, Virginia; Orangeburg NFH, South Carolina; Bowden NFH, West Virginia; and Edenton NFH, North Carolina -- reared more than 300,000 fish.

The young striped bass came from the eggs of adult bass captured in May by Maryland DNR biologists with the help of Maryland watermen in the Watermen's Compensation Program. The adult bass were captured in the Nanticoke River, the upper Bay at the C&D Canal, and the Patuxent River. Bass from the Patuxent yielded most of the offspring for this year's initial project effort.

When the young bass are brought to the Manning hatchery for tagging, they are temporarily held in specially-designed circular tanks filled with saltwater from the Bay. The use of saltwater, even in the transportation process, greatly reduces the possibility of disease and stress among the young fish. After the fish are acclimatized to the tanks, small groups are anaesthetized and a small internal coded wire tag is implanted in the cheek muscle. When the fish recover from their brief operation -- usually no more than half an hour in a special recovery tank -- they are ready for their last truck trip, this one to introduce them to their ancestral tributaries of the Chesapeake.

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"To evaluate the effectiveness of the project," notes Bill Horn, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, "we are carefully maintaining records on the distinct strains of striped bass being used. Each fish is implanted with a special tag indicating its river of origin, the rearing hatchery and year of release. Within the next year, we'll begin assessment in the Bay to see how the released striped bass are doing. Within the next three to five years, though, these fish will have grown and migrated to coastal waters as distant as Maine and North Carolina. At that time, we'll need the help and cooperation of all the affected coastal States in our stock assessment work."

The tagging method currently in use at the Manning Hatchery is a fairly recent development. First used within the last decade and created primarily for species such as salmon and lake trout, the internal method of tagging with miniature coded wire tags enables fishery workers to tag large numbers of fish with minimum handling and stress to the fish. The tagging operation at Manning has six machines, with each operator capable of tagging nearly 400 fish per hour.

In commenting on the fish tagging operation, Maryland Natural Resources Secretary Torrey Brown said: "This is an outstanding example of intergovernmental cooperation which we hope will ultimately lead to the replenishment of this valuable resource."

Charles Wooley, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Chesapeake Bay Fisheries Coordinator, explains that the coded tags will enable researchers in the recapture studies to determine which strains of striped bass, and which rearing hatcheries, yield the highest survival rates. "We're very pleased with the success of the project so far," said Wooley, noting that the fish were purely wild strains. "The tags will really help us assess the value of this type of hatchery endeavor, and learn more about the wild strains of fish in the Bay."

Both Service and Maryland officials have praised Maryland watermen for the support and assistance they have provided to the effort. The watermen, many of whom were employed in the commercial harvest of striped bass in the 1970's, are being paid out of a special State Watermen's Compensation fund established after the State prohibited the harvest of the species. The fishing ban was enacted to help slow the precipitous decline in striped bass stocks from the late 1970's onward. The decline in Bay and east coast striped bass populations is believed to be caused, in part at least, by overfishing and by environmental contaminants.

The current five-year cooperative plan between Maryland and the Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to produce nearly two million stockable fish for the Bay. If initial stocking efforts prove effective, the Service may seek cooperative hatchery programs with other coastal States to augment sagging natural striped bass reproduction in those areas as well.