



Guidance Document for NLC Resolution on Stocking Non-Native Hatchery Trout Over Native Trout Populations

INTRODUCTION

At the 2011 annual meeting of Trout Unlimited in Bend, Oregon, the NLC passed the following resolution regarding stocking over native trout:

RESOLVED, that the NLC is opposed to Chapters or Councils stocking of non-native hatchery trout on top of native trout populations

This resolution was endorsed by the Organizational Development Committee of the Board of Trustees as well as the full Board of Trustees of Trout Unlimited.

After informing the Chapter and Council leaders of this resolution, we received a number of questions and concerns that were raised in connection with the application of the resolution to their area. Hence, an Ad Hoc Group was formed to address these questions and concerns (see Ad Hoc Group membership list below).

The Ad Hoc Group has determined that a guidance document to assist Chapters and Councils in implementing the policy is advisable. This document is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the intent of the policy, the second section provides relevant definitions of terms and concepts associated with the implementation of the policy and the last section includes a policy guidance statement and examples of how the policy applies to specific on the ground circumstances. A separate document has been prepared which answers questions received by the Ad Hoc Group.

INTENT

The intent of the NLC in passing the resolution was to protect native trout populations from the negative impacts of hatchery stocking activities on top of those populations. The NLC learned that a number of Councils and Chapters were involved in this activity in several states. It is scientifically well established that the stocking of hatchery trout over a native trout population is harmful to that native trout population. The NLC passed the resolution, which was endorsed by the Board, with the purpose of ensuring that TU Chapters and Councils are not participating in or supporting such stocking activities in furtherance of TU's mission to protect and restore wild and native trout.

Trout Unlimited supports a science-based approach to trout management. This is a heritage that has been passed down through the organization originating with its Michigan founders. This heritage is evident in the North American Salmonid Policy [see Tackle Box, under important TU policies] which was peer reviewed by a preeminent group of fisheries and aquatic scientists prior to adoption by TU in 1998. The Salmonid Policy provides advisory recommendations to TU. With regard to stocking over native trout populations, the Salmonid Policy recommends that TU oppose stocking in water containing healthy self-sustaining populations of salmonids, more specifically the Policy advises TU to protect native populations by working to eliminate non-native stocking where it could adversely affect native salmonid populations. Trout Unlimited's Conservation Agenda establishes the priorities of protecting and restoring native trout and salmon.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions pertain to this policy:

- (1) Hatchery Fish – a fish incubated or reared under artificial conditions for at least a portion of its life.

- (2) Introduction – The deliberate or accidental release into the wild of a non-native species.
- (3) Native Fish Enhancement Stocking – The release of hatchery raised native fish into a water containing genetically identical or nearly genetically identical wild native fish for the purpose of supplementing the number of fish in the native population or refreshing the gene pool of the native population. In such cases, the use of first generation offspring of wild naturally reproducing species is preferable to fish maintained in hatcheries for many generations.
- (4) Native trout species - Native trout species - A fish species or subspecies that originated and occurs naturally in or has been restored to a specific water.
- (5) Non-Native Fish – A fish species introduced outside its natural range (includes categories of exotic, non-native subspecies, non-indigenous and alien fish species).
- (6) Participate – to provide organizational support (political and/or financial) for a policy of stocking hatchery fish over a population of native trout and/or to actually take part in all or a portion of the physical stocking process.
- (7) Population – a group of fish originating and reproducing in a particular time which do not interbreed to any substantial degree with any other group of fish reproducing in a different area or in the same area at a different time.
- (8) Range – The geographical distribution of a species.
- (9) Stocking – The release of species into a specific water following initial introduction.
- (10) Viability - >95% probability of persistence of the native trout population over the next 100 years.
- (11) Wild Fish – Individuals of a species that persist through natural reproduction. (Wild fish are not necessarily native species.)

POLICY GUIDANCE STATEMENT

The prohibition on Chapters and Councils participating in the stocking of non-native hatchery fish on top of native trout is to further TU's conservation policy of protecting and restoring native fish. The policy applies to native trout, but not to non-native wild trout or to salmon or steelhead.

It is critical to the effective implementation of this policy to understand that the policy applies to 'existing' native trout populations. These populations are comprised of individual fish that are part of a single species and are naturally occurring in the location where the population is found. The area where a native fish is "found", for purposes of this policy, encompasses all locations, including seasonal or temporary locations as well as locations utilized for migration, which the fish occupy as part of their life history cycle. This policy is not intended to apply where there is a physical barrier present separating areas containing native trout from areas that do not contain native trout. This policy will also apply to those areas where a determination is made to restore a native trout population where the historical native population has been extirpated or to an area that did not historically have fish, but is being utilized to conserve a native trout gene pool. This policy is not intended to apply to areas where no native trout existed historically and are not being utilized to conserve native trout genetics.

The initial goal for protecting and restoring a native species is to conserve sufficient numbers of groups of native fish in a species so that the overall population is viable. Viability of a native fish population means there is a statistically high probability the overall population will persist for a foreseeable amount of time in the face of environmental threats. Viability in most cases can be attained without restoring native fish to their entire historical range. Once viability is obtained, the issue of restoring native fish to more of their historic range takes on an additional element of political expediency rather than solely biological imperatives.

TU's North American Salmonid Policy advises against stocking over the top of 'healthy' populations of native trout. While the health of a fish population can be a variable target when looking at a population over a time continuum, for purposes of the NLC resolution, healthy populations means those populations which have sufficient habitat, numbers of individual fish and other environmental conditions available so that the population can reasonably be expected to be able to complete their life history cycle in a self-sustaining manner. The healthy population standard is a significantly lower standard than viability. The health of a population can be increasing or decreasing based on what point in time the population is looked at. A population is still considered healthy for purposes of the NLC resolution, even if the health of the population is decreasing, so long as a significant number of the existing adult members of the population can be expected to complete their life history cycle. In general, the NLC resolution is not intended to apply to water bodies or sections of streams or rivers that do not contain native fish.

Prior to determining whether a water body or stream or river section does not contain a healthy native trout population, a Chapter or Council should determine whether a native fish management plan exists in their state. This plan should be examined to learn what areas and what existing native fish populations are covered by the plan and what locations may be subject to future restoration efforts. If the area proposed for stocking is included in the plan for current protection and restoration efforts or future efforts, no stocking should occur. If the area proposed for stocking has native trout present, but in limited numbers below the minimum requirements to be defined as a healthy population, and the location is not included in a management plan, an analysis should be made to determine if it is appropriate to add the location to the plan. The persistence of native trout (even in small numbers) generally indicates there are good habitat qualities present that should be conserved. The CSI can be used to assist the process of determining whether a particular location is a good candidate to be part of a native fish restoration effort. No stocking of non-native fish should occur, even in areas that do not contain native trout, if the stocked fish will have an adverse impact on an existing native trout population. Stocking could occur if measures are taken, prior to stocking, to prevent the impacts on the existing native trout population, such as the installation of a barrier.

If your Chapter or Council is located in a state that has native trout present, but no native fish management plan, consideration should be given to working with the relevant state agencies to establish such a plan.

All activities of Chapters and Councils involving management of fish in water bodies should be based on the application of the best available science. Utmost care should be applied with actions involving the presence of native trout. The guiding principle in determining whether to undertake an activity should be, 'first to do no harm'.

ON THE GROUND EXAMPLES

The following examples from Virginia may help illustrate how to apply the resolution to streams in your region:

Mossy Creek – An extirpated native brook trout population within a spring creek (1950's), an over-developed watershed under private ownership, with poor water quality. The stream is managed by the state game department (with VCTU support) as a permanent trophy brown trout fishery. NLC resolution does not apply.

Dry River – A freestone stream with an intact, reproducing native brook trout population, whose watershed is protected by national forest and a local water supply plan and has great water quality. The stream is managed by state game department and TU as a native trout (no stocking) fishery. Here the NLC resolution fully applies.

Beaver Creek (4 distinct sections) – The lower section was historically native brook trout habitat but the population has been extirpated. The stream is freestone and spring creek with marginal water quality due to surrounding agricultural practices. Much of the stream is in private land ownership. Habitat improvements are ongoing by TU, managed by a local TU chapter as a stocked rainbow fishery for the past 15 years. The middle section has insufficient in-stream flow to allow upstream fish passage beyond

spring branch, although an occasional brookie washes down in high water conditions. On this section there is no trout management. The headwater section is protected by national forest and is a small stream with good water quality. This section is divided by a flood control dam into two sections, and is managed by the state game department as stocked, put and take fishery below dam (without TU support). The stream is managed as a native brook trout only fishery above the dam, with TU support. Overall, the NLC resolution applies to the upper headwater section, prevents TU support of the lower headwater section, and does not apply to the lower spring creek section (although it may eventually if restoration is successful and a viable brook trout population can be re-established). Multiple management strategies on this stream are only possible due to pre-existing barriers to upstream fish passage.

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