

## April 13

### [A quest for cold water](#)

#### Helping out Lehigh trout

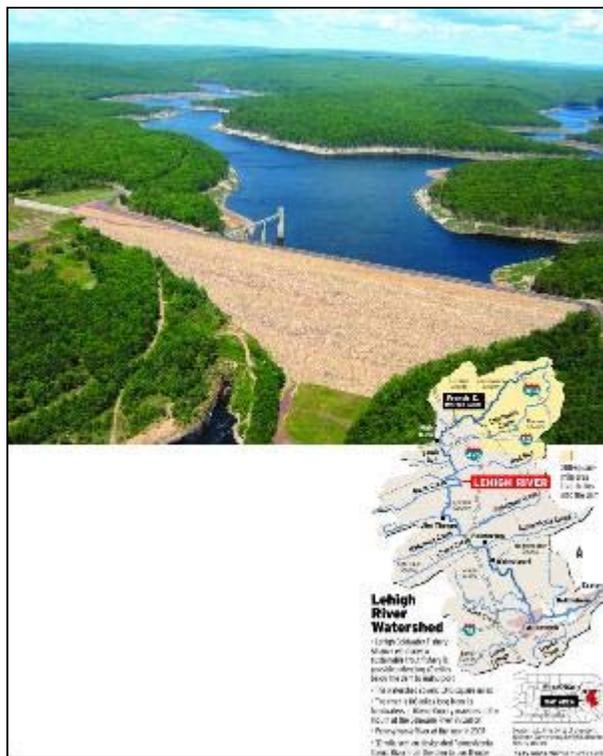
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Sports Reporter

Dean Druckenmiller fell in love with trout fishing in the big rivers out West.



Jake Markezin, secretary of the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance prepares to release a Rainbow trout caught in the Lehigh River near Palmerton in May 2006.

gary visgaitis photos/for the times leader



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Places such as the Madison River – a wide expanse of clear, cold water in Montana that traverses scenic mountains.

The Lehigh River has many of the same qualities as its counterparts in the West, Druckenmiller said, but it is missing one thing.

“It lacks a consistent supply of cold water,” Druckenmiller said. “It has the scenery, character, habitat and forage, but not the cold water all summer long.”

And that makes it difficult for trout.

Druckenmiller is president of the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance based in Schuylkill County. The group is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine a way to provide a consistent supply of cold water to the Lehigh River.

Trout are vulnerable when water temperatures rise above 68 degrees, Druckenmiller said. When the river gets warm, trout seek refuge in the cold tributaries flowing down from the mountains. But sometimes, he said, they perish.

There is a remedy to the problem, but Druckenmiller’s group faces a large hurdle: The Francis E. Walter Dam.

The dam is operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which determines dates for water releases to supplement recreation on the river. Those releases cause the temperature to rise in the Lehigh River, Druckenmiller said, creating a problem for the trout fishery.

The main purpose of the dam is flood control, followed by recreation. There are 24 water releases planned for this year between May 10 and Oct. 24.

When the releases occur, the discharge is withdrawn from the bottom of the reservoir – where the coldest water is located. The early-season releases use up most of the cold water, resulting in summer releases of water that can be 75 degrees.

Druckenmiller said the warm water starts to show up in the river in July.

“I’m sure some trout do die as a result of high water temperatures in the summer,” he said.

Jake Markezin, secretary of the Alliance, said the dam was built in 1961 and is antiquated because water can only be withdrawn from the bottom of the reservoir.

The Alliance would like sustained releases of 55-degree water, and Markezin said there is one way to accomplish the goal.

“The dam needs the ability to mix water from different depths. That would be the lifesaver for the cold water,” he said.

## Study under way

The Corps of Engineers is conducting the first phase of a study looking at the flow and temperature of the releases and the river. The \$150,000 phase should be completed this fall, and then a second phase will examine the impact on water quality and chemistry.

The study is funded by cost-share among the Corps, state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. Greg Wacik, an ecologist for the Corps Philadelphia District, said the study will focus on a 40-mile stretch of the Lehigh River from the dam down to Northampton Borough.

The study will produce a model that the Corps can use to gauge the impacts of different discharge scenarios.

Regardless of the study’s results, options may already be limited by the dam’s age.

When the dam was built in 1961, its primary purpose was flood control. Without the ability to discharge water from different elevations, Wacik said, the 55-degree temperature goal may be unattainable.

The dam at Beltzville Lake in Carbon County was built 10 years after F.E. Walter, Wacik said, and has the ability to discharge water from different elevations. As a result, the bottom layer of cold water lasts for the summer and can be utilized when needed.

To incorporate the same ability at F.E. Walter would take work and money, Wacik said.

“We may have to investigate construction alternatives, but there may be cheaper options like retrofitting the tower (which controls releases),” he said. “The flexibility to mix levels would certainly prolong the cold water through the summer, and at Francis Walter we just don’t have that capability.

“This is a great resource that can be maximized better, and we want to see what can be done without jeopardizing flood control.”

Markezin shares Wacik’s optimism regarding the study and the Corps’ willingness to search for a solution.

"You're basically trying to improve the ecosystem with a project of the federal government. In this day and age, that's appealing to the Corps because it's lessening the impact of a dam," he said.

## Downriver impacts and potential

Druckenmiller said the stretch of the river from White Haven to Walnutport can be improved with a consistent cold-water release.

The cold water released from the dam, he said, can be sustained miles downstream by mountain tributaries pouring into the river below Sandy Run, which is about 8 miles downriver from the dam.

"The more miles you can get below 68 degrees, the better the fishery," Druckenmiller said.

It's a goal that would've been considered out of reach in the 1930s when coal silt and acid mine drainage made the Lehigh a dead river.

Today, it has cleaned up and in 2007 was named Pennsylvania's River of the Year by the state Department of Conversation and Natural Resources.

Now it's time to keep giving back, Druckenmiller said.

"We have a river here with large rocks, pools, runs and prolific aquatic life," he said. "If we can get coldwater into it all summer long, it will be one of the best trout fisheries in the state."

## online

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