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STATEMENT FROM THE CONSERVATION ALLIANCE OF NEW YORK, INC

The newly formed Conservation Alliance of New York (CANY), Inc. applauds Governor Pataki and DEC Commissioner Crotty for releasing the hiring freeze affecting five of the seven and one-half vacant hatchery-related positions. The organizations, including the New York State Conservation Council and the Conservation Fund Advisory Board, and individuals who helped make this happen deserve a sincere “thank you” from New York’s sportsmen and women.

CANY also applauds the DEC for its plan to initiate a “Youth Turkey Hunt” and for its proposed “Big Game Youth Hunt”. Both programs would help recruit young New Yorkers to the sport of hunting. A fully funded, vigorous hatchery system offers the same opportunity for the recruitment of young fishermen and women.

However, according to CANY’s board, the job of restoring the “excellent program of stocking trout in the waters of New York” is far from being complete. CANY will focus attention on the remaining needs and work to have them addressed. The fish culture program historically had 80 exempt positions – positions that did not require approval to be filled. That number now stands at 52, a 35% reduction, in spite of the increased demand for stocked fish. At its March 14, 2004 meeting the Conservation Fund Advisory Board passed a motion encouraging the CANY, the NYSCC and other interested conservation organizations to work together to identify and evaluate new sources of money for the DEC’s Conservation Fund. CANY and the NYSCC pledged their support and will work together toward that end.

This year’s stocking program will not be like that of other years. There will be at least 100,000 fewer fish to be stocked because of the premature release of those fish last fall. The release was caused by inadequate staffing. Estimates of the revenue lost to the businesses that cater to fisherman due to this reduction range from about \$300,000 to over \$1 million.

Following a license fee increase in 2003, the license sales jumped \$9 million to a total of \$40 million. Thus the 2003 license sales component of the Conservation Fund amounted to about \$52 million (\$40 million in revenue generated from the sale of fishing and hunting licenses and \$12 million from an excise tax on fishing and hunting equipment). Those same sportsmen and women are responding negatively to the fact that their license fee money was not spent for its intended purposes. So far in 2004 sales are down by 85,661 licenses and about \$2 million in revenue.

The lifting of the hiring freeze was not accompanied by funds necessary to refurbish or upgrade existing hatcheries. Three hatcheries, Rome, Randolph and South Otselic, are being evaluated for closure because it will require tens of millions of dollars to bring them back to full production. In spite of the increasing demand, there are no plans to build new hatcheries. The hatcheries represent an investment in the infrastructure necessary to support tourism, and, like any investment, should have an expected return on that investment. Because they provide economic benefit to the State, they should be funded from the General Fund.

The DEC is planning fewer stockings for the spring of 2004. That means that the fish that are stocked will be stocked all at one time rather than stocked in small numbers over the course of the season. That translates to a boom or bust situation. Those who are in the position to follow the hatchery truck during the week will reap the harvest, and those who can't will face tougher times. Opportunities for volunteers to assist with stocking will be reduced. Once the stocked fish are caught, economic activity associated with fishing will stop.

CANY has been alerted to increasing frustration on the part of fishermen because they are told what to do via new regulations by the DEC, but they are not given the biological or ecological reasons. For example, more restrictive trout-fishing regulations are being proposed for certain waters in Region 9, but there is no explanation as to why. Those regulations will reduce the number of large fish caught that can be kept and impose catch and release restrictions on waters historically fished by people who enjoy eating trout. Catch and release can be a wonderful experience, especially for those who have evolved to that approach to fishing. However, it can also be frustrating to the beginner who hasn't yet reached that point in his or her life where catching is more important than eating. Without the data, CANY can only ask why. If the DEC wishes to reduce the number of fish taken home, possibly they could allow children under 16 to keep a fish or two.

There is a pilot system being tried by the DEC that would tie stocking rates for a given stream to the number of people who fished that stream. They are asking fishermen and women to send in post cards telling the agency where they fished. However, fishermen and women are having difficulty in locating the source of the postcards. They also are reluctant to tell anyone the location of their favorite fishing waters for fear that they will become known to the "masses". Therefore, there is concern that the DEC may interpret a low number of postcard returns for a given stream as an indication that the stream is too lightly fished to warrant further stocking.

The final hatchery-related issue that the Board has chosen to address at this time is that of access. If the land adjacent to a stream is posted, that stretch may not be stocked. The lack of stocking can have an adverse economic impact on neighboring communities. One way to remedy the lack of access is for the Governor, an admirer of Teddy Roosevelt, to use the "Open Fields" model supported by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and create an "Open Streams" program to acquire public fishing access along trout streams. This would have a positive economic impact on communities bordering trout streams and, because trout are barometers of water quality, have an environmental benefit as well.

BACKGROUND

As a first step toward developing a proposal for reversing this downward trend, the Board looked at the economics related to fishing. About 1.5 million people annually fish in New York, and according to a 1993 study by the Sport Fishing Institute, New York anglers annually spend \$838,311,000. That translates into 18,950 jobs, \$33,522,000 in State sales tax, \$19,429,000 in State income tax, and \$49,952,000 in Federal income tax.

A Cornell study on the economic impact of the Altmar Hatchery on the Salmon River documented that fish from a hatchery built at a cost of \$18 million produced an annual contribution to the economy of the surrounding communities of \$572 million. The economic contribution of trout fishing to the small Catskill community of Roscoe exceeds \$10 million. And the biggest benefit is not economic but environmental – fish are barometers of environmental quality. In New York's classification system for drinking water, the best water is indicated by the fact that trout inhabit it.