



Doug Warnken stands next to one of the holding ponds at the Mayr Brothers Hatchery in Aberdeen. He and other Poggie Club members have devoted many hours to helping the hatchery operate. (Terri Harber | The Daily World)

Hatchery has successes but struggles financially

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In a salmon hatchery, the line between success and failure — life and death — is thin and every detail counts. Those involved with operations at the Mayr Brothers Hatchery along the Wishkah River about 15 miles north of Aberdeen say even very young salmon can feel stress and the hatchery workers do everything they can to make it easier on the fish.

“When they are moved, when the temperature is too high, even when they eat,” said Todd Baltzell, who serves as the on-site manager of the facility, which is owned by the state, but managed by the Grays Harbor Poggie Club, a longtime volunteer group focused on outdoor recreation. “They go through stress for their entire lives.”

Hundreds of thousands of coho, chum and Chinook salmon start their lives at the hatchery and are released into the into the Wishkah after reaching a certain level of maturity. Chum and Chinook are ready to go out into the world in about 90 days while coho require closer to a year. Only a small percentage will survive to return to the hatchery to spawn about three years after release. The years in between are spent on an arduous ocean swim that ends where their lives began — at the hatchery. Their eggs are harvested and the hatchery life cycle continues.

Baltzell grew up on the Mayr Brothers property and is highly familiar with his surroundings. His father, Terry, managed the hatchery for decades. As a boy, Baltzell swam with the fish in the large holding pond that’s no longer used. Smaller ponds have since been created nearby and these have turned out to greatly help increase fish production.

The Poggie Club has been managing the operation for about nine years. Club

members have been improving the hatchery, project by project. It's the group's major community activity, though its fishing derbies often receive more attention. Both endeavors are to enhance opportunities for outdoor recreation on the Harbor and throughout the state. The hatchery's main goal is to supply enough salmon so people can fish, said Bob Garman, a Poggie Club member.

"Poggies have donated more than 3,000 hours, maybe even 4,000 hours, of labor to the hatchery," Garman noted. Over the course of a year that would be equivalent to about two full-time employees.

Baltzell, Garman and Doug Warnken, also a member of the Poggie Club, explained last week how it took significant effort to make the facility more hospitable to the fish reared there. The group has been working to boost fish production by keeping more of the young salmon alive so they can swim out into the wider world and eventually return to spawn and produce offspring.

It turns out the large pond used for as long as Baltzell could remember had a lot of stagnant spots within it, which caused a significant number of the fish held there not to live long enough to be released. There's a persistent need to monitor water temperature and botulism, a substance dangerous to the young fish, in all of the ponds. Liners help protect the fish from the poison.

A sizable group of Poggie members turned out on a recent Saturday to place a liner in one of the ponds. Netting is placed over the ponds so hungry predators can't get to the small fish. They live in covered tanks before moving into a pond. The Chehalis Basin Task Force assisted with the creation of the coho pond.

Pipes have been added so the fish can swim from one place to another in some instances. The young salmon don't like being moved by people and prefer to do it themselves.

"It stresses them out less," Warnken explained. "We try to eliminate every extra step."

The Poggies have also worked to make it easier for more people to go fishing. People with disabilities have better access to fish in the river because of improvements made to the property, including sidewalk, parking and a separate fishing spot on the river next to the hatchery's large fish access point. Sierra Pacific donated money for the work.

Another focus has been on making it easier and safer for fish returning to the hatchery from the river. The entryway leading from the river into the hatchery has been modified so adult fish can easily enter.

"It's a great facility," said Randy Aho, operations manager for Twin Harbors Complex, Washington Department of Fish and Game. The state operates or owns hatchery and rearing facilities across the state, including Mayr Brothers.

All of these facilities have a positive impact on local economies because people take vacations and spend money at motels, restaurants and stores near where they come to fish, he said.

The Mayr Brothers Logging Company business operated Mayr Brothers as a steelhead rearing facility in partnership with the state starting in the mid-1970s. Then, a non-profit group, Long Live the Kings, focused on Chinook salmon recovery efforts there before the state ultimately acquired the hatchery.

Even though the Poggie Club has been able to improve the facility and, in turn, boost the number of fish coming back to spawn in recent years, an important source of grant funding used to operate the hatchery, the Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account, has been reduced to about \$70,000 over two years. These grants only a few years ago were more than \$190,000, Warnken said.

The Poggies are concerned this funding cut could result in their losing money that finances Baltzell's full-time status.

Local fish and game officials have put a lot of effort into helping the Poggie Club bridge the growing financial gap in recent years. And the Aberdeen City Council waived water charges to the Grays Harbor Poggie Club for a year, beginning this past Oct. 1, because of the grant reduction. The club lost a portion of its state funding this past year and asked for roughly \$6,000 in annual water charges to be waived.

The hatchery is the rare exception to the city's rule of not giving breaks to group's for utility service. The council did so this time because it enhances the operation of the city's water filtration plant located downstream from the hatchery on Squirrel Road because the hatchery pulls water raw and unfiltered off the mainline. That makes the city's filtration plant run better with less waste, according to Rick Sangder, public works director for the city.

This break is scheduled to end this fall. In the meantime, the Poggies and Fish and Game are looking for alternative sources of funding.

Donations can be sent P.O. Box 741, Aberdeen WA, 98520. Visit the group's Facebook page for details about the group.



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This fish entryway at the Mayr Brothers Hatchery In Aberdeen was greatly improved by the efforts of the Poggie Club. (Terri Harber | The Daily World)