

# VALLEY

## Creston hatchery ready to begin overhaul

By JIM MANN  
The Daily Inter Lake

An overhaul at the Creston National Fish Hatchery will soon get underway, about 15 years after the hatchery's dam was found to be less than ideal.

Because of its potential instability in the event of an earthquake, the earthen dam has been the subject of much discussion in the last decade.

Last year, the project took on a controversial tone because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered a plan that involved draining Jessup Mill Pond, largely to eliminate the hatchery's reliance on surface water that can expose fish to disease.

Public opposition played a part in the service taking a different approach. The project getting underway next month will involve construction of a water treatment plant and a large spillway, as well as rebuilding the dam, a task that will close Creston Hatchery Road for a five-month period starting next spring, said Mark Maskill, the hatchery manager.

"We're moving into a different era with these improvements," Maskill said. "This process has played out for about 15 years."

Starting this weekend, the entire hatchery facility will be closed to the public for about a year. The hatchery has long been open for tours.

The project begins with the removal of 12 outdoor raceways and construction of a water treatment plant that will provide the hatchery with disease-free water.

A new water intake system will be installed in Jessup Mill Pond, and the current water pump station, which looks like a barge on the pond, will be removed. The pump system will be replaced with a 10-foot by 10-foot gated spillway that will run through the dam (and under Creston Hatchery Road) into Mill Creek.

The spillway will be far more effective in rapidly draining the pond in an emergency. The reconstructed dam will have a broader — and more stable — slope leading to the hatchery.

A sand filter will be installed in the dam's interior to capture any water seepage.

The water purification system will be able to produce about 7,000 gallons per minute, roughly what the hatchery has recently been using on average. But the entire hatchery will not necessarily run off that water alone, Maskill said.

The hatchery will continue to use well water and surface water for specific purposes. The purified water will probably be most useful for raising cutthroat in the hatchery's outdoor raceways. In the past, cutthroat have been more prone to disease than other species, such as rainbow trout, so they have generally been reared in the main hatchery building.

Being able to move them to the raceways will allow the hatchery to raise larger, catchable cutthroats, Maskill said.

"It gives us so much versatility," Maskill said of the treatment system. "But we're not going to be running this thing full bore."

Over the next year, Maskill said, the hatchery will continue to rear about 750,000 fish, mostly cutthroat, in its hatchery building, and a bull trout brood stock will be maintained at the facility.

When the project is complete, he anticipates the hatchery's fish production will eventually increase.

The entire project cost, from planning through design and construction, is about \$6.4 mil-

lion.

Maskill said the project was delayed about eight months because about \$4 million of the construction fund was diverted last year to cover firefighting costs from the summer of 2002. It was just one of several Fish and Wildlife Service projects that were delayed. When this year's federal budget was finally approved in the spring, Congress replaced the money and the project was allowed to proceed.

The service advertised for bids and the project was awarded to Johnson Wilson Constructors of Helena.

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