

Catastrophe on the Pigeon River

Vanderbilt, Michigan - On Monday June 23 my wife, Sue, and I went to the Pigeon River to fly fish for trout. When we arrived, we noticed the flow of the river was unusually low and black as oil. Sue asked me, "What is wrong with the river? Something is terribly wrong!" We knew we could not fish in these conditions and suspected something went terribly wrong at the Song of the Morning Ranch dam upstream. We then drove to an access site upstream of the dam to find normal flows and clear visibility. Our suspicions were sadly correct. When we returned home, I contacted the local DNR – Fisheries Biologist, Neal Godby, to report there was a catastrophic problem on the Pigeon River.

On Sunday, June 22, the owners of a private dam at the Song of the Morning Ranch (Golden Lotus), illegally discharged tons and tons of sediment from their impoundment downstream into the Pigeon River and later admitted to making a mistake. This is a mistake the citizens of Michigan and our natural resources can not afford. This illegal sediment discharge has been running as black as oil throughout the entire flow of the river. As of July 10, 2008, black sediment continues to flow in the Pigeon River. The 65 acre impoundment is full of organic material, called sediment. The result of this discharge, killed significant numbers of fish and other aquatic life. Any aquatic life that has survived is not out of danger.

Normal flow of the Pigeon River is 60 cfs. The operators of the dam released 185 cfs (more than three times its normal flow) on June 22. Then, on the morning of June 23, they essentially shut the flow off to a water flow of 6 cfs. Even without the release of sediment, just the fluctuation in flow alone would have had a devastating effect on aquatic life. The dissolved oxygen (DO) levels were at or close to zero. This has a fatal outcome for fish. At DO levels of 5, stress on fish is greatly heightened; and at DO level of 6 or greater fish actively thrive.

Since I reported the problem the Department of Natural Resources and Department of Environmental Quality have been on the scene investigating the cause, collecting and recording various data.

In 1957, the dam broke leading to a similar catastrophe, killing fish and other aquatic life. In 1984, the dam was breeched and a similar event occurred again. This impoundment holds back water and the sun warms the water temperature. Irregular fluctuations send a rush of warm water downstream. Trout need three elements for survival: Cold, Clean Clear water.

This event does not just affect fish and other aquatic life. It affects beavers, otters, minks, bald eagles, ducks, blue herons, deer and other animals that use the river for food, drink and protection. This catastrophic event affects anglers, canoeists/kayakers, campers, hikers, bird watchers, and other Pigeon River State Forest enthusiasts. It has been

suggested by biologists this destruction will have a negative affect on our “Blue Ribbon” trout stream for years.

We must be committed to never having this occur again.

Please make your financial contributions to the address below.

Thank you for your commitment and support,
John Walters – President
Headwaters Chapter – Trout Unlimited
c/o Pigeon River Restoration Fund
PO Box 1873
Gaylord, MI 49734
C (231) 313-0057