

FRIENDS OF THE UPPER DELAWARE RIVER

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As Heat Wave Threatened Fishery, Conservation Groups And Policymakers Teamed to Cool the Upper Delaware

Cooperation between conservation groups and government policymakers helped stave off a water temperature crisis on the Upper Delaware River during last week's heat wave.

As air temperatures spiked to nearly 100 degrees in the region on July 22, water temperatures at Lordville, NY, reached 78 degrees and were expected to continue to climb.

It was the first water alert of the summer under a modified reservoir water release plan that took effect on June 1. Members of Friends of the Upper Delaware River, a nonprofit conservation group, scrambled to find relief for the cold water ecosystem, including its trout, according to its board chairman, Dan Plummer.

Under the Delaware River Basin Commission's new Flexible Flow Management Program, releases from Cannonsville Reservoir were fixed at 500 cubic feet per second for the summer months and bumped up to 600 cfs a few weeks ago. The new release plan is providing nearly twice as much water than had been released the past four years under the old program.

The 600 cfs figure is sometimes called the "FUDR number," due to the fact that the original FUDR board has for years advocated a minimum flow of 600 cfs out of Cannonsville.

River temperatures depend largely on the amount of cold water released from the reservoirs. Releases come from the bottom of the reservoirs at temperatures as low as 42 degrees, and at sufficient levels this keeps the rivers cool for miles downstream.

But it became clear that 600 cubic feet per second was insufficient with air temperatures approaching triple digits and with climbing water temps recorded by the river gauge at Lordville.

The conservation group discussed its options.

"The 600 cfs out of Cannonsville should take care of the fishery most of the summer, but it is a minimum release figure, not an ideal," said Bob Bachman, a Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commissioner and FUDR board member. "There will be times when we'll need more cold water, and last week was a perfect example."

With all three Delaware River reservoirs at more than 90 percent of capacity, FUDR and its partners in the Delaware Watershed Conservation Coalition decided to ask government policymakers to temporarily increase the

Cannonsville releases to 1,000 cfs—something that has been done only rarely in the past.

“With soaring air temps, rising water temps threatening the trout, and plenty of water in the system,” said Diane “Dee” Maciejewski, chairman of the New York State Council of Trout Unlimited, “we’ve got to ask for the extra water.”

Other groups that supported the effort included Theodore Gordon Flyfishers, Federation of FlyFishers, and the Pennsylvania State Council of Trout Unlimited.

Jeff Zimmerman, FUDR’s attorney, contacted DRBC commission members--government officials from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware--to explain the situation. As a result, the conservation groups got their extra cold water.

The water spigot was opened on the afternoon of July 22. Within 36 hours, the river’s temperature downstream at Lordville had dropped by more than 10 degrees, to the mid-60s.

Plummer said any of the DRBC commissioners could have vetoed the increased flow. He credited the support of Paul Rush, with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, and John Hines of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

“These two guys took the lead and got it done,” Plummer said. He noted that Rush followed up with a phone call to make sure all knew the increased flow plan had been executed and hoped it was having the intended results. The flow rate was backed down to 600 cfs after the heat wave passed.

FUDR received many emails and calls congratulating everyone who had helped secure the cold water.

A message from Andy Boyar of the Catskill Flyfishing Center summed it up: “On behalf of the trout, aaaaaah! Thanks.”

Plummer said conservationists and policymakers alike are still sorting out how the new release program will play out in the long run. But he said the conservation groups appreciate the current working relationship with all parties involved.

“Things are looking good,” Plummer said. “Guides and fishermen up and down the river are claiming this is the best season we have had in a long, long time.”