

January 8, 2021

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
101 S. Webster Street PO Box 7921
Madison, WI 53707-7921

Subject: Loss of Trout and Smallmouth Bass Fisheries

Dear Secretary Preston Cole, Deputy Secretary Todd Ambs, Director Brian Weigel, Bureau of Watershed Management, Director Justine Hasz, Bureau of Fisheries Management, and DNR Board Members:

The Southern Wisconsin Chapter of Trout Unlimited (SWTU), the Harry and Laura Nohr Chapter of Trout Unlimited (NTU), the Badger Fly Fishers, and the Wisconsin Smallmouth Alliance respectfully request that the Department direct the necessary staff and resources to conduct a comprehensive study of the catastrophic loss of trout and smallmouth bass fisheries in the Martin Branch of the Grant River in Grant County and Otter Creek in Lafayette County and to develop restoration actions to be implemented.

Until four years ago, the Martin Branch was a good Class II brown trout stream with very fishable numbers of trout in a good range of sizes. Members of both TU chapters enjoyed fishing it and caught lots of trout. Since that time, the trout have vanished. Numbers have not diminished-- the trout are gone. Longer ago, Otter Creek was one of that area's premiere smallmouth bass streams. The fishing was great and the bass so abundant that the Department re-stocked the Yellowstone River with Otter Creek bass. The stream has never recovered from several fish kills and today has very few, if any, smallmouth bass. Miles of department-purchased easements on both streams attest to the historic quality of both fisheries.

As bad as the current fate of the Martin Branch and Otter Creek is, they indicate a troubling trend in trout and smallmouth streams across the southern part of the Driftless Area, south of USH 18. In many the populations of those species are plummeting.

In the case of the Martin Branch and Otter Creek, the underlying problem is almost certainly some agricultural practices at key locations in the watershed. The Otter Creek fish kills were all manure related and the Department has documented since 2007-8 the destructive effects of agricultural-related sedimentation on the Martin Branch.

When these watersheds are managed in a healthier manner, the streams should recover. The Martin Branch has a good flow of cold water and both streams have the elements of excellent fish habitat still in place.

Two other points:

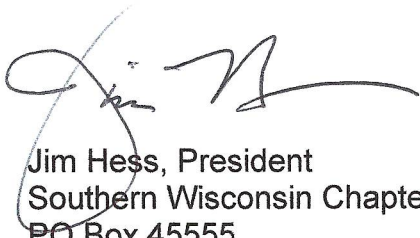
1. Do not take this letter as a criticism of the fish and water quality biologists who have worked on these streams. Our members have the utmost respect and appreciation for them and have worked with them to protect and improve many streams. For years they have documented the problems with these streams and tried to protect them. These streams have not received the attention and effort they should have been afforded by the DNR Board and management.

2. The study and restoration should involve local landowners, farmers, and other stakeholders in as cooperative fashion as possible. NTU and SWTU have long histories of working with farmers to protect and improve streams and to increase the public's enjoyment of them. We look forward to similar cooperation in these watersheds.

We recommend that this study begin as soon as possible and focus on identifying the sources of the sedimentation, manure, and other pollutants destroying these fisheries. We also ask that the Department seek the assistance of the Grant and Lafayette Counties' LCDs in this effort and in helping to reach out to landowners and other stakeholders. We are ready to help in any way we can. To that end, NTU is renewing its contacts with folks in the Martin Branch watershed who want to take better care of the creek. We expect that this study will guide the restoration of these two streams and fisheries and shed some light on the problems besetting other streams in that area.

The wretched state of these streams goes far beyond the disappointment of anglers. It represents a failure of the Department to address its Public Trust responsibilities. The Martin Branch, Otter Creek, and the Wisconsin residents who care about them deserve better.

Thank you for your attention to this request.



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cc: Todd Kalish, Deputy Director of Bureau of Fisheries Management
Steven Little, Assistant Deputy Secretary DNR
Mark Aquino, Director Southern District DNR