



Lake Tomah advocates celebrate arrival of game fish

News Release Published: October 6, 2010 by the [West Central Region](#)

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TOMAH – A years-long project to restore Lake Tomah to its former glory is nearing the finish line. A crew from the state Department of Natural Resources stocked the newly recovered lake Wednesday with 5,700 largemouth bass.

"I've never been so happy in my life to have fish," said Trudy Peterson, a lake resident who was among the first group of citizens who formed a lake committee eight years ago. "We're just thrilled."



NEW GUY IN TOWN – This largemouth bass fingerling, temporarily displayed in a portable viewing box, was among 5,700 bass stocked Wednesday in Lake Tomah by the DNR as the once carp-infested lake is getting a new lease on life.
WDNR Photo

When they first started talking to the DNR, and learning about their options, the lake was in dire condition. Invasive carp had destroyed the aquatic vegetation. The water was turbid with muddy sediments. There were no game fish.

"It was really dirty and carp infested, and no one was fishing anymore, and we were worried about the skiers because it was a dirty lake," Peterson said.

Joe McDaniel was a leader back then. He saw the lake group go through some tough times before they were able to muster up public and political support.

DNR watershed expert Patrick "Buzz" Sorge, who helped the city obtain grants for the project, credited McDaniel for sticking with it and generating the social will to take on such a dramatic project.

Years of planning led to the day, one year ago, when the DNR arrived at the lake with a team of fisheries scientists, and with the assistance of helicopter pilot Rene "Sparky" Stimart, treated the entire water body with rotenone, an organic chemical that killed all the fish in the lake without harming birds, mammals or amphibians. Thousands of stunted carp floated to the surface and then sank in the cold water, never to be seen again.

"We had 5,000 set aside for fish removal, but we didn't need it," Peterson said.

The lake, an impoundment of the Lemonweir River, was lowered by several feet to aid in the treatment and to allow vegetation to take root in the exposed shallows. Tree tops were dropped into the water to create habitat. The city committed to dredging out the sediment basin at the mouth of the Lemonweir. Monroe County brought in tons of rock to stabilize small islands and create off shore reefs for habitat and to attenuate the erosive action of waves and boat wakes.

The lake was gradually refilled this year, and with habitat work largely complete, the results are



READY FOR RELEASE – DNR fisheries biologist Lee Goehring transported the bass from a rearing pond at Black River Falls. They went straight from the tanker into the lake. "Basically, fish don't like to be handled," he said.
WDNR Photo

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already remarkable. Water clarity has improved from 3 to 4 inches to three to four feet.



FILL 'ER UP – These largemouth bass fingerlings, being released from the fish tanker, will grow to become the top predator in Lake Tomah. WDNR Photo

“I think it’s fantastic,” said Tomah Mayor John Rusch. “The lake condition before was horrendous.”

When the DNR shocked the lake this past spring, not a single carp was found. What they did find when they returned in September, said DNR biologist Jordan Weeks, the team leader, was hundreds of bluegills and crappies and some fathead minnows, likely the result of amateur stocking.

“I think some local citizens did their own stocking, which is illegal,” Weeks said.

This is a major league bad idea, Weeks said. Either the fish or the water used to transport them could be carrying a disease or invasive species too small to see. Or non-native species, like a white crappie or a green sunfish, could be mistakenly transferred.

“It could ruin the entire project,” Weeks said. “There’s a reason we have a law that says you can’t stock fish.”

For now, things appear to be OK and the panfish, with a lake full of food and no mature predators, will multiply and grow rapidly. By next summer, the bluegills will be pushing six inches and the bass 10 inches. The DNR will return to stock northern pike. The idea is to create a predator-dominated fishery that will make it difficult for carp to establish a new foothold.

By the fourth or fifth summer, the fishery will be mature and this urban gem of a lake will once again be a treasured resource.

McDaniel pointed to the aquatic plants waving in the shallows Wednesday. There weren’t any plants growing anywhere in the water last year, he said. He remembers when the lake was rich with bluegills and crappies and bass. In the winter, there’d be dozens of fishing shanties on the ice.

In just a few years, he said, the lake he fell in love with will be back again.

“It will be just like it was before,” McDaniel said. “It will be a fish paradise.”



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