**A\_0141C864H240810\_14381455\_C8OO1\_proxy.mp3**

[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** From. With these walleye ponds, beginning of the year, they're going to be utilized for our small fingerling fish. At that time, our biggest issue with our location here is proximity to these wetlands and toads. So toads are going to come in, they are going lay their eggs in our ponds. Those eggs are going hatch, those tadpoles are going swim around, and when it comes It's time to take those small, fringling walleye out of the ponds. We are counting them by weight. So, if you can imagine a bucket brigade of, you know, five or six people bucketing fish up to a distribution truck and you've got a bucket that's an unknown amount of tadpoles and an unknown amount of fish at that point makes it hard. So, there's a lot of toad patrol that goes on down here. Got to get those guys out of the pond. For large-fingering fish, We do have some wading birds. That might come by. We're mostly worried about them taking our minnows and to be honest with you their beaks are sharp enough to puncture our liners so you know honk your horn at them just try not to let them feel welcome here but other than that walleye are left you know they're fed and they're left to do what they need to do to grow. As far as the water chemistry goes if we notice any issues After our water chemistry test, the only thing we can really do is run water. So we've got right here, our shallow fill is on, flowing water through this pond. At the catwalk, there's a series of dam boards that maintain the water level, and we're actually flowing water over the top of those, so the water's flowing in one direction. If water chemistry has started to get... Really worrisome. We can turn on what's called our jet fill, which is how we can add the most amount of water as quick as possible. And then there's a downspout to add water directly below the catwalk. Typically, you know, this time of year you might come here and see all of our ponds running at the shallow fill. Long, hot, sunny days. The pH is going to start climbing up And... You know, associated dissolved oxygen as well. I should mention these ponds have all been fertilized before any fish got put into them early on in the season. So fertilization is, you know we use brewer's yeast and ground alfalfa to kickstart some zooplankton growth. We typically leave one pond without fish for a period of time. We treat that as our bug pond. Are able to take zooplankton out of that pond and inoculate the other ponds with that. During the middle of our growing season here, once we're not worried about zooplanking and all our walleye are feeding on minnows, we will add a blue pond die to these ponds. That pond die refracts more sunlight than it allows to penetrate and really helps us control photosynthesis. So without that, we would have major allergy problems all the time. At this time of year, we've, we flowed, is that a word? We put so much extra water into these ponds at this point that that pond die has left anything that leaves our hatchery, either the building itself or the ponds, any of that water does not get reused. We're not a recirculating system gets pumped out from that little station behind you up over the top of this hill to a three-acre retention pond and we let mother nature filter our water for us. We're coming up pretty quickly here to large fingerling harvest so the way that works is a little different than with the small fingerling. Instead of bucket brigading and counting by weight, we're able to use a fish loader which allows us to basically just add fish with no water to our distribution truck so at that stage we're counting those fish by water displacement. It's a pretty nice system. At the bottom of each of these ponds is what's called a catch kettle. If think of a U-shaped concrete structure, if I was standing in it the water level would be right above my knee and you're able to put intake of that fish loader down into that catch kettle. It sucks fish and water up to a hopper where there's a series of grates that the fish kind of bounce along and the water falls right back into the pond and just fish once again are loaded onto the truck. For that it's kind of an all hands on deck operation so you've got multiple people in the pond kind of herding the fish towards that catch kettle. You've got someone manning the hopper because occasionally you have to help those fish keep bouncing along those grates. Of course you have to have drivers for the distribution trucks and people monitoring the water level in those trucks. For stocking fish, we use two B-class semi trucks and one F450 that usually gets us by. Sometimes we have to put a tank on a smaller pickup truck. We'll salt the water, so you're adding salt to the distribution truck water, that helps calm the fish. And we're able to put much more on board than otherwise. So you're able leave here with sometimes enough fish that you won't have to send a second truck to that lake. I'm trying to think of what else for stocking. We service predominantly the upper Wisconsin river strain of walleye. Uh, at this time we also have some extended growth walleye from the upper Chippewa river strain. Those were given to us by Spooner, the Hatchery and Spooners. So, uh, for our purposes, we're spawning our own upper Wisconsin fish. Um, those fish, our upper Wisconsin, fish might be stocked anywhere from Lock Butte is there down to Lake Dubay in Stevens Point. Our upper chipfish, it's kind of all up to Spooner where they'd like them, but you know think like Yellow River area, something like that. So I always have people on these tours ask me you know the genetics of these fish and the state of Wisconsin doesn't discriminate between lake to lake basis. It's all by watershed. So.

[00:07:09] **Speaker 2** Chippewa, upper Wisconsin, Green Bay, and is the Fox considered different or is that part of Green Bay?

[00:07:16] **Speaker 1** I think it's up to a certain impoundment it's considered Green Bay but then past that I think it's its own watershed as it were.

[00:07:30] **Speaker 2** How many typically come through here?

[00:07:32] **Speaker 1** Fish wise? Yeah. So this year, I think we've got 140, I'd have to really double check my numbers, but maybe, okay, don't include this, like 140,000 large fingerlings and about maybe half again as much for the smalls. We can produce quite a few smalls the reason we even worry about small fingerling people always ask aren't you just feeding other fish with those they're very small two or three inches maybe the lakes that those get put into have been shown to be receptive to them and they're very cheap to make. So, you know, large fingerling walleye. There's a few dollars for the state to produce, whereas the smalls are cents. I can get you some numbers before we're done.

[00:08:32] **Speaker 2** But that is one of the other people have talked about like by the time the number that survived from the egg Yeah, this to like an actual trophy fish. Oh, it could be hundreds of dollars for that one

[00:08:44] **Speaker 1** Hundreds of dollars and a very low percent chance too. So most of our lakes around here, just three to five years before that fish is gonna be 15 inches. And the closer they get to like a magical 30 inch mark, more slowly they're gonna grow. Females especially will grow quickly in the beginning and then they start putting a lot of energy into making eggs every year. So this slows down their growth rate.

[00:09:13] **Speaker 2** So when someone asks, is it worth it, like, is it worth, because there are researchers that say, you know, we shouldn't be putting effort into stocking, we should put effort into making the lakes more habitable, or at least when we stock only stock in the lakes that we know will actually sustain a population.

[00:09:29] **Speaker 1** Yeah so that's two different schools of thought there. You've got people who think that kind of return everything to nature and if you were to do that there's quite a few lakes in northern Wisconsin that would have no walleye. The only reason they have walleye in the first place is because of the hatchery system. We are you know we've been around since 1901 and only the fourth oldest hatchery in the state so it's a legacy that's been going on for quite some time. As far as supplemental stocking goes, if you're going to supplement an already naturally reproducing population, that has been shown to be... Not as productive. What we do a lot here is our biologists will identify lakes with declining natural reproduction, maybe zero natural reproduction. And if you start looking at those lakes you're talking about really high dollar tourist attractions that people wouldn't want to to if they weren't walleyeing them. And then there's some lakes that managed more as a trophy fishery and you know supplemental stocking along the way might be helpful for them but generally speaking if you were to eliminate you know rearing of walleye and stocking of wall I I think the major outcome is suddenly there'll be much fewer walleye destinations in the state especially you know if you look at when this place started focused on black bass that was what people were wanting to catch they started bringing walleye all over the state and that became you know why people wanted to come to Johnson, so.

[00:11:29] **Speaker 2** It's interesting that that history, like Wisconsin in many ways, literally grew its walleye tradition.

[00:11:36] **Speaker 1** Yeah, yeah, so funny like anecdotal stuff with muskie any you know world record muskie back in the 20s and 30s seemed to be caught by someone who owned a bar or tavern walleye kind of started following suit with that and people were advertising they'll come to my resort we have you know swingers of walleye you can come catch The state realized pretty quickly they had to support that effort. And because of that, you've got two of the world's largest walleye hatcheries in northern Wisconsin with Austin Spooner. I think, as far as, you know... It's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy in a way you put the money and time into it and people will enjoy it. To say that it's a waste of time depends on what you're trying to get out of it. Would it be awesome if we could move to all habitat protection development rehabilitation? Sure, I've yet to see anything that says that that's 100% successful. You look at even some fairly recent studies on creating habitat for walleye spawning. They don't seem to have much promise. So, we seem to have reached a point with walleye in particular where, and you can talk to biologists who know a lot more about this than I do, but there's lakes of greatest concern when it comes to walleye that despite many efforts to kickstart natural reproduction don't seem to be responding to those and therefore facilities like ours are going to have to responsible to keep while I end them.

[00:13:42] **Speaker 2** Most people don't know that walleye are a river fish.

[00:13:44] **Speaker 1** Yeah, yeah.

[00:13:46] **Speaker 2** So how many of the lakes up here that people like became Wolleye destinations like were originally stocked maybe not by the state but like Wolley weren't native there to begin with?

[00:13:56] **Speaker 1** It's hard to say, so until the modern genetics they'd be really hard to pin down a number of lakes. You can pretty safely say that you know these small acreage landlocked lakes with you know Poor spawning habitat to begin with probably you were never meant to have walleye in them just because they can naturally reproduce somewhere doesn't mean that they belong there as it were uh they of course belong there now if you ask people but um you know a lot of larger deep water clear water lakes probably have a walleye population in them to begin with but you go. Back in the 1800s, there were people just filling up a milk jug, a fry, and bringing it wherever they wanted. So, it's one of the reasons we work so hard to maintain the genetic integrity of our fish leaving here. We're trying to avoid, obviously, creating what's known as a hatchery strain of fish where we're breeding spawning the same fish again over and over, but also there's a reason why they're genetically diverse and maintaining that seems to help with natural reproduction as well.

[00:15:21] **Speaker 2** What would happen if the state stopped doing this like and there were no more walleye? People just move on to something else and Another fish would take its spot in the ecosystem, but sure what would be lost?

[00:15:34] **Speaker 1** Sure, ecosystem wise, most places would be fine. There's other fish species that would fill that niche. I guess I've talked to plenty of people. I pull up in a truck to a boat launch and I go and I start getting ready to dump fish off. And I have plenty of of people ask me, hey, what do you have in there? What are you bringing to us? Walleye, thank you. No one is mad that we're putting walleye into the lakes. If I were to say, I've got to load a smallmouth bass, I'd get run out of there in some places. So smallmouth Bass, it's a public opinion matter. They think it's major competition for walleye. Maybe it is, maybe it's not. I think it really depends on the system you're talking about.

[00:16:23] **Speaker 2** I thought it was largemouth bass that were actually more competitive than smallmouths before habitat. It is.

[00:16:26] **Speaker 1** It is yeah but you tell that tell that to a 60 year old with a $200,000 boat they don't want to hear it so i think the fallout from not having any walleye on the landscape it'd be more you'd see it more with how people use the resource you wouldn't necessarily see major changes to the ecosystem i'm sure there'd be some but It'd be a lot less money spent on, you know, coming here with your boat from Illinois. You'd get a lot of less time spent on the water at certain times of the year. You got to think spring walleye is a big deal, ice fishing is a deal for walleye. So it'd just be less tourism dollars coming in the winter, coming in spring. So people might gravitate more towards muskie fishing in the fall for that reason, or Bass fishing has kind of taken a foothold in Wisconsin and it's an important driver for tourism, but I don't personally think anything's going to replace walleye.

[00:17:37] **Speaker 2** There's just something different about it.

[00:17:39] **Speaker 1** Yeah, yeah, and it's part of the culture in a way that it's hard to sell a certain demographic of people on bass or musky, you know, both of which have become a very catch-and-release-oriented species. People like keeping a few walleye a year. Some people keep more than that. People like keepin' a few while you're having a fish try. It just wouldn't be their vacation in Wisconsin without it, honestly.

[00:18:12] **Speaker 2** People aren't coming to take tours here to watch a smallmouth or a bluegill.

[00:18:15] **Speaker 1** Right right no and there's we have two types of people here we have the musky diehards and the people who want to learn more about walleye there's really no one who's coming on a tour taking time out of their day just to learn about our white sucker production or just to look at our nice 1933 buildings it's you know people love these fish and you know i think a good reason, but. I'm not going to say that if this was a largemouth bass hatchery, we wouldn't have any visitors. It's not quite that far, but there's a certain type of person who comes here in the first place.

[00:19:01] **Speaker 2** So what's it like for you when you get to actually like see the full cycle of this and bring them to the lake and let them go?

[00:19:06] **Speaker 1** I like it a lot. So I start the year on a spawning crew, you know, get out of here, go do something hands on. Very enjoyable. I am starting to really enjoy working with the ponds more as I've been here longer. The full, I have pictures on my phone of here are eggs that we spawn and here are fish leaving my truck and it's fun. I feel like you have a little bit of stake in the game, a little ownership of the resource in a way, but yeah, I really enjoy it.

[00:19:41] **Speaker 2** And do you catch and release while away, or what's your fishing technique?

[00:19:44] **Speaker 1** Yeah, um...

[00:19:48] **Speaker 2** He was a genus

[00:19:51] **Speaker 1** I mostly bass fish in the summertime, I don't really like eating fish unless it's something I caught through the ice, personal preference, but I like walleye fishing in the wintertime.

[00:20:04] **Speaker 2** Yeah that makes sense. I know there's a lot of people that like, especially summer, they won't touch a crappie or...

[00:20:08] **Speaker 1** Yeah, that too, yeah.

[00:20:12] **Speaker 2** Think that covers what we wanted out of this. This was great. Okay, can I get you to say and spell your name and give your title just so I have it correct? Sure.

[00:20:19] **Speaker 1** So I'm Ryan Flaherty, that's R-Y-A-N-F-L-A H-E-R-T-Y, and I'm a fisheries technician advanced at R&M Key Fritch Hatchery.

[00:20:29] **Speaker 2** Excellent. Thank you so much. You're welcome. Really appreciate it.