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Fish and the feds

How your angling and boating taxes make Minnesota a better place to fish

Fish program paying off

If you fish, you should know Minnesota's best-kept secret.

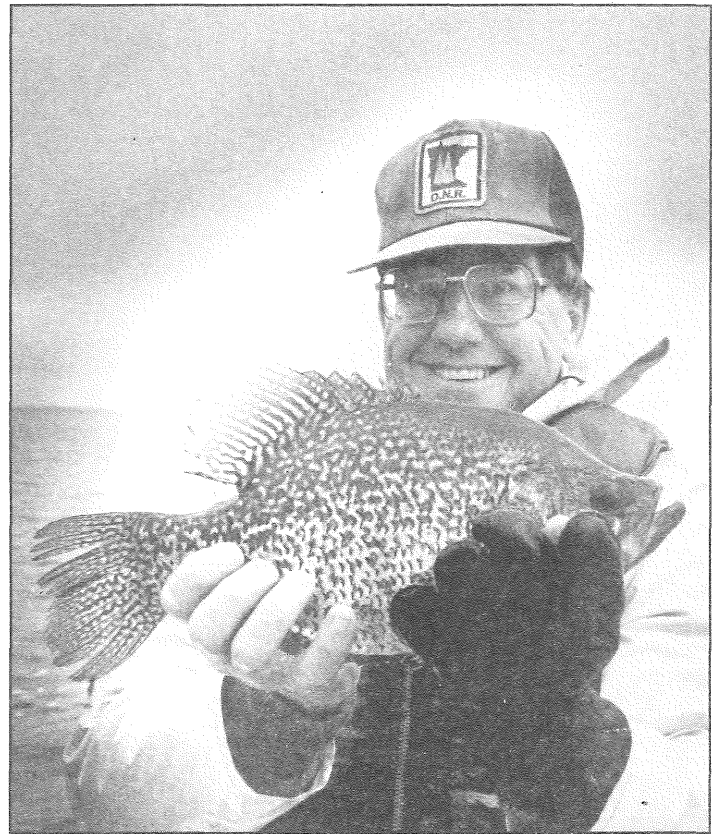
Unknown to most anglers is something that helps put fish on your line, protects your lakes and streams, and even provides boat ramp sites and fishing piers.

The secret—and it shouldn't be one—is called the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program. That mouthful of words is worth about \$7 million a year to Minnesota boaters and anglers as money invested in more than 5,000 fishing lakes, rivers, and streams across the state.

The federal Sport Fish Restoration Program is basically a catch-and-release tax system. First, the U.S. Treasury catches about \$350 million a year from an excise tax on fishing equipment, motorboat fuel, and other angling products. Later, it releases the money to each state based on the geographic size including water area, and the number of people who buy a sport fishing license. Minnesota usually receives the fourth or fifth highest reimbursement, behind Alaska, California, Texas, and sometimes Michigan.

Each year in Minnesota, federal reimbursement funds are used to:

- enhance or develop fish habitat at 20 to 40 sites



Minnesota DNR

Your tax dollars at work making bigger fish, better fishing, and more fishing access sites.

- provide 10 to 12 new public boat-launch sites
- fund 550 to 600 lake-survey and lake-mapping projects and 150 stream surveys
- acquire valuable stream and lakeside land and habitat
- prepare hundreds of fisheries lake and stream management plans
- support 18 to 22 fisheries research projects
- build and install 10 public fishing piers
- stock trout, salmon, and muskellunge, and assist in operating six trout hatcheries

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- support the MinnAqua aquatic education program
- provide environmental review and planning
- support aeration and lake reclamations.

"The federal aid program is extremely valuable to this agency and everyone who fishes," says Jack Skrypek, fisheries chief for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. "Unfortunately, it has a low profile. Yet without this revenue, anglers would see less up-to-date lake information, research, trout stocking, boat access, and quality habitat management."

The Minnesota DNR Section of Fisheries operates on an annual budget of about \$17 million. About \$10 million comes from the sale of fishing licenses. The rest, about \$7 million, comes in the form of federal aid reimbursement.

"The federal Sport Fish Restoration Program is an outstanding example of the 'user-pays, user-benefits' philosophy," says Skrypek. "Every time anglers buy a rod, reel, boat or motor, they contribute to fisheries management."

Feds hook fish funds in 1950

The concept was simple: Act today to ensure good fishing tomorrow. And that's exactly what the U.S. Congress did.

In 1950, Congress passed the Federal Aid in Sport Fishing Restoration Act. It was patterned after the 1937 Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act through which a federal excise tax on hunting equipment generates dollars for wildlife resource management.

The fishing legislation was sponsored by Rep. John Dingell and Sen. Edwin Johnson. Immediately, this new 10 percent excise tax on angling equipment became a valuable source of funding for fisheries work in Minnesota and other states.

As times changed, needs changed. By the

late 1970s, needs began to outpace available dollars. To reverse this, Congress added an amendment in 1984 to the Sport Fish Restoration Act. The amendment, sponsored by Sen. Malcomb Wallop and Rep. John Breaux, tripled revenues. It did so by enlarging the original Dingell-Johnson constituency from sport anglers to include all boaters, transferring federal motor boat fuel tax receipts, and adding import duties on pleasure boats and yachts into a new Aquatic Resources Trust Fund.

Today, the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund (Wallop-Breaux Trust Fund) collects about \$350 million a year through Dingell-Johnson and Wallop-Breaux legislation. The tax is collected directly from manufacturers or importers. The money is paid to the U.S. Treasury, which in turn transfers it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for distribution among the states. States receive 75 percent reimbursement from this fund *after* they have spent their money to complete a federally approved project. Minnesota receives about \$7 million a year in reimbursement.

That was then ...

It's changed, fishing. Gosh, how it's changed.

When our forebears first landed in North America and moved westward into Minnesota, they found the waters of the New World teeming with fish. The abundance seemed boundless. But of course, it wasn't.

By the late 19th century, people were noticing the decline of fish populations. Causes were many: Accompanying the Industrial Revolution were unregulated commercial fishing, deforestation and poor agricultural practices that promoted erosion, and increased industrial pollution—all of which contributed to a decline in water quality. By the early 1900s, good fishing was slipping away due to our own indifference.

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Still, angling was darn good. The angler of 40 or 50 years ago caught larger fish than we do today—and waited less time between bites.

... This is now

Today, angling reflects our society—it's fast-paced and technology-based.

Each year, the average Minnesota lake is subjected to 20 to 30 hours of fishing pressure per acre. Big lakes such as Mille Lacs can receive more than 2 million hours of fishing pressure a year, and that's *intelligent* angling pressure! Today, the "average" angler is armed with hundreds of dollars worth of electronics, high-speed boats, hair-thin fishing line, and as much knowledge as any old-school guide ever had.

The Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program aims to maintain quality fishing in the face of this increase in angling pressure and other threats to water quality and habitat.

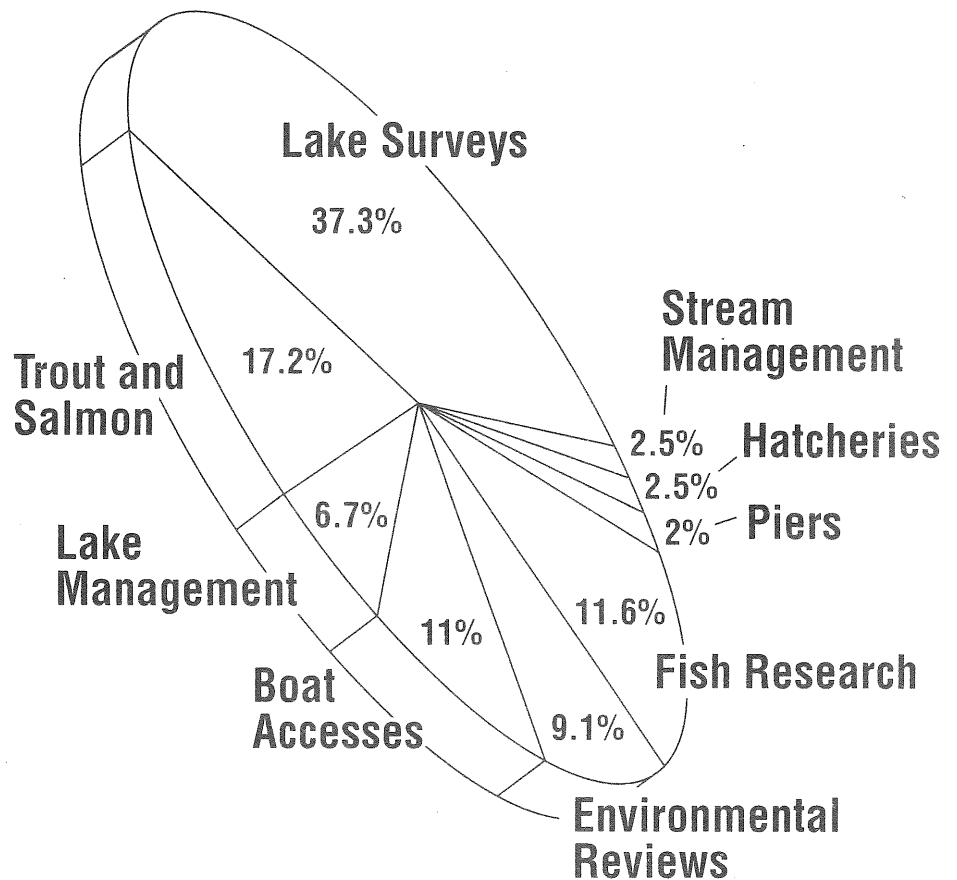
Since 1950, the federal aid program has provided hundreds of millions of dollars to states. This money has been funneled into habitat protection and enhancement, fish rearing, and thousands of other projects that aim to put more and bigger fish on the end of your line.

Minnesota federal aid highlights

Here's how federal sport fish dollars are

Where the federal dollars go

How Minnesota spends its \$7 million in yearly federal fisheries reimbursement



working for you in Minnesota:

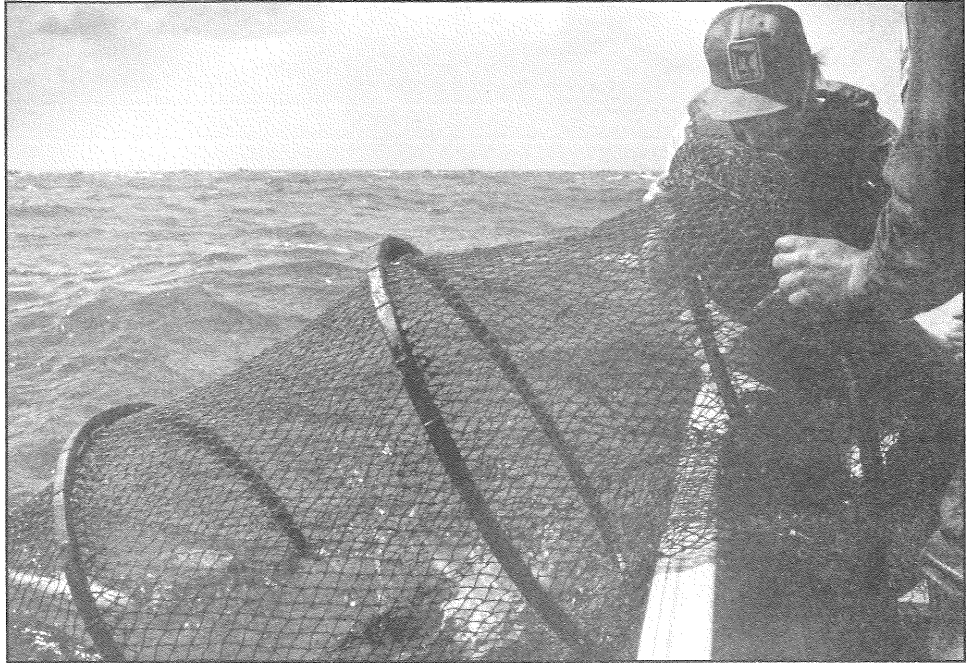
ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW This watchdog function is the top priority for the Section of Fisheries. Why? Because it is infinitely wiser to protect existing habitat than to try to recreate it later. Each year, the DNR reviews thousands of permits from lakeshore owners, businesses, and cities seeking to alter shorelines, wetlands, and other landforms, or to add or remove something

from lakes, rivers, or streams. Some permits are approved; some aren't. "Environmental review" is the process of weeding out or "mitigating" (requiring compensation for environmental damage) projects that do the most harm to fish populations.

FISHING EDUCATION Although Minnesota has some of the best fishing in the country, many Minnesotans either don't know how to fish or don't have the opportunity to visit good fishing waters. Changing that is MinnAqua, the DNR's new fishing education program. MinnAqua teaches youngsters how to fish while explaining the ecology, conservation, and ethics of fishing. MinnAqua provides classroom materials, mobile displays, teacher in-service training, and more. The program, which began in 1990, has helped thousands of children and adults better understand their aquatic environments.

TROUT AND SALMON The DNR operates six coldwater fish hatcheries, located in southeastern, central, and northeastern Minnesota. The hatcheries supply lake trout, chinook salmon, steelhead, and Kamloops trout for Lake Superior. They also provide brown, brook, and rainbow trout for dozens of streams and lakes. Part of the expense to maintain and operate Minnesota trout hatcheries is reimbursed from the state's \$7 million in federal aid.

HABITAT DEVELOPMENT Habitat is many things. It's water. It's spawning rubble. It's an undercut bank where trout can hide. In short, good habitat is crucial to a fish population, and that's why each year the Section of Fisheries completes dozens of projects to improve habitat.

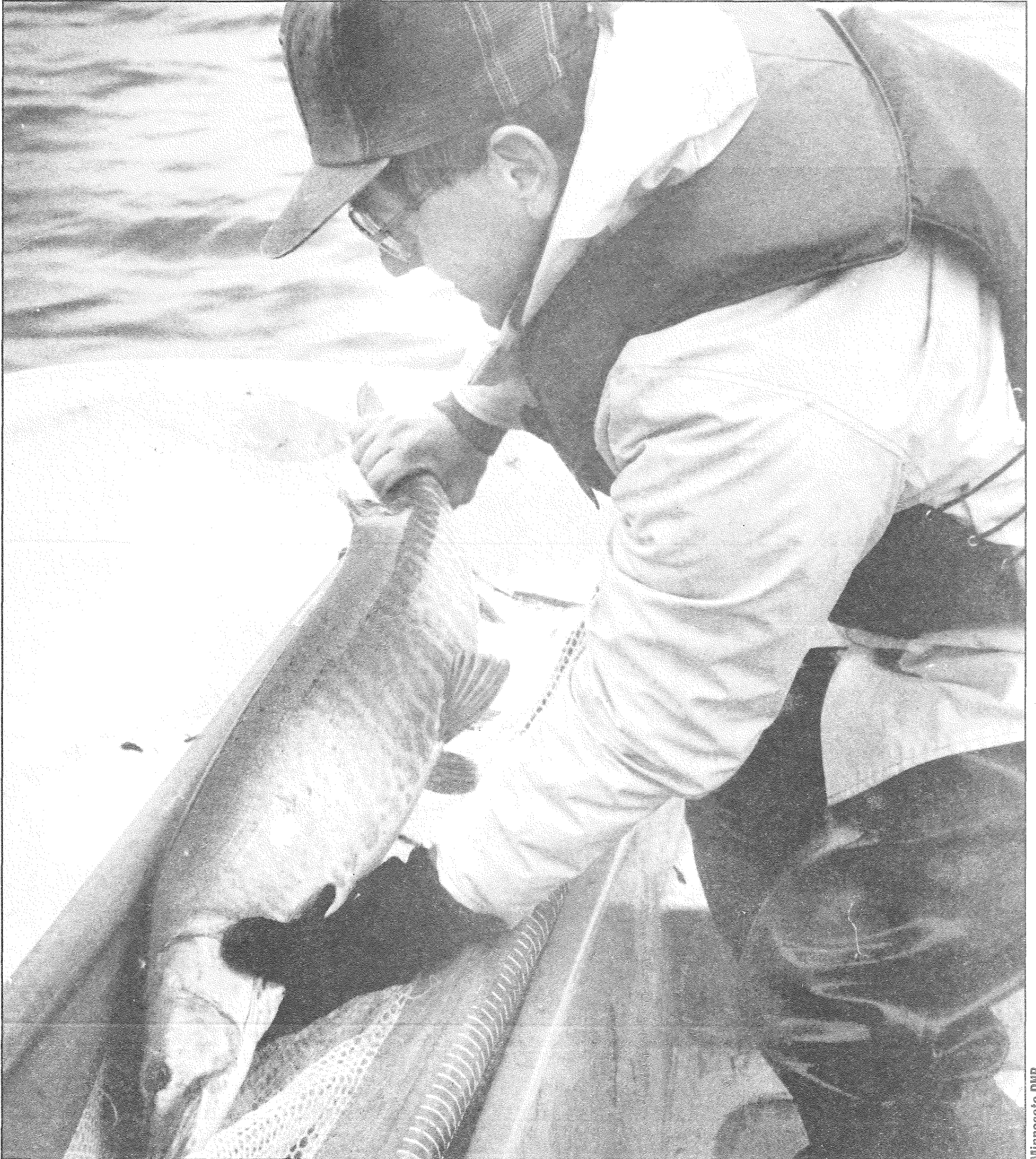


Minnesota DNR

The bucktails you buy help pay for muskie research down the road. DNR fisheries researchers trap muskies in hoop nets in Mille Lacs (above). The length, weight, and girth of each fish is recorded (right), to help fish managers decide how best to manage the muskie population.

In the southeast, for example, fisheries managers improve trout streams by adding rip-rap here and an underwater "crib" there. In central Minnesota, they restore degraded walleye and northern pike spawning areas and are re-establishing bulrush beds. Statewide, fisheries managers work with citizens, local governments, and other agencies to reduce erosion and siltation that ruins water quality.

RESEARCH Good management requires good data. To that end, the DNR's Fisheries Research Unit conducts 18 to 22 long-term applied research projects a year. "Applied" research isn't ivory tower contemplation. It is research often suggested by fish managers looking for answers to specific fisheries problems. Applied research is pioneering study that paves the way for better fish management and subsequently better fishing. Minnesota DNR research has resulted in a switch to a muskie strain with greater trophy



potential. It has made walleye and trout stocking programs more cost-effective. It has found environmental factors that limit brown trout in streams. Federal aid has also reimbursed more than 150 studies which have been the road maps to improved fisheries management.

PUBLIC BOAT RAMP SITES: In 1985, states became eligible to receive federal aid for building new boat ramps. Since then, the DNR has built dozens of public accesses with these reimbursable federal funds. From 1985 to 1993, the DNR's Trails and Waterways Unit received about \$800,000 a year for boat launching site development. Starting in 1994, this amount will rise to nearly \$1 million, thanks to a change in the funding formula.

Up close: one example of how fish restoration funds help anglers

Everything runs downhill ... into lakes, streams, and rivers.

That's why the Section of Fisheries makes environmental review its number one priority. Lakes and streams are a reflection of their watershed. Where there is good land management, water is clean and fishing is usually good. Where there is poor land management, water is dirty and fishing is crummy. It's that simple.

"Environmental review is incredibly important because Minnesota's landscape is constantly changing," says Dave Johnson, DNR environmental review specialist. "Every day developments go up, woodlots come down, and society puts new demands on the land. Environmental review works to minimize changes that would otherwise harm natural resources, including the places where people like to go fishing."

The Section of Fisheries conducts about 600 major environmental reviews a year. In addition, the staff reviews minor nuts-and-bolts projects such as road resurfacing and proposed

power line or pipeline crossings. Larger reviews include such things as residential or industrial developments, new landfills, new golf courses, executive home developments, and major highway expansion projects. Some projects that could do grave damage to water or fisheries require an Environmental Assessment Worksheet or an Environmental Impact Statement. The 600 or so annual reviews are in addition to hundreds of less formal investigations conducted by fisheries managers for such things as okaying a permit to control vegetation along a lake shoreline.

"It is the cumulative impact of thousands of small, individual actions that has the potential to threaten fish populations and the quality of angling," says Johnson. "Our goal is to work with the people of Minnesota to avoid these actions when we can, minimize the impact when we can't, and in certain cases make sure mitigation occurs." An example of mitigation is requiring a developer to replace a wetland for one that is filled as part of a construction project.

"Environmental review is an integral element of fisheries management for the simple reason that it protects habitat," says Skrypek.

"To have good fishing tomorrow, we must preserve and maintain quality habitat today."

Skrypek likens spawning sites and other vital habitats to grains of sand in a cupped hand: "The challenge we face is to not let important habitat slip through our fingers one grain at a time. We must hold on to what we have. This makes sense biologically. And for the taxpayer and license buyer, it makes sense economically."

Federal oversight and state involvement

Seven million dollars.

That's roughly how much the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transfers to the Minnesota DNR Section of Fisheries every year under the federal

Sport Fish Restoration Program.

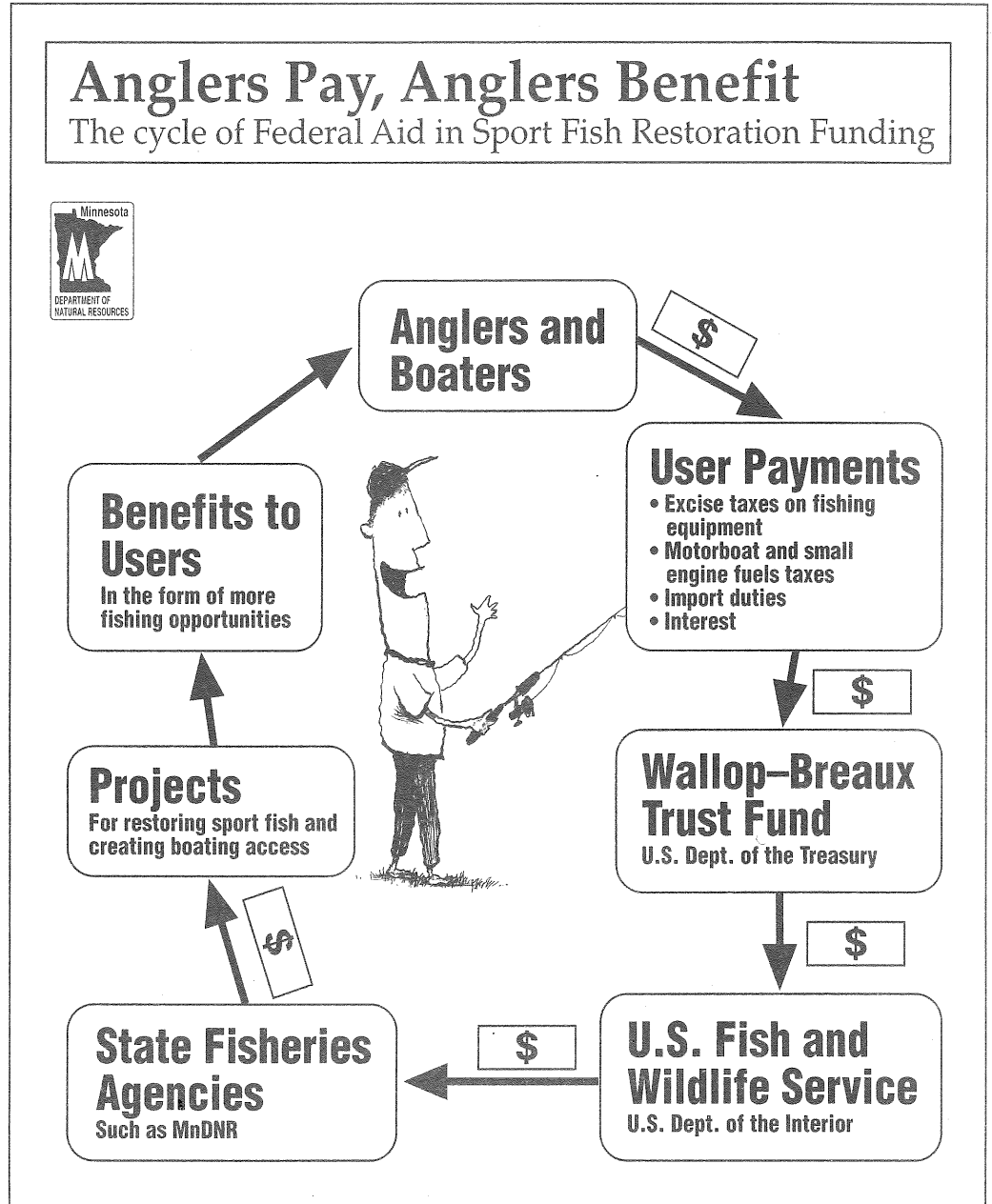
What happens to that money in Minnesota?

The short answer: a lot. The money is allocated to 17 different programs spread throughout the state.

“Sport Fish Restoration funds are used for everything from buying land to mapping lakes,” says Skrypek. “The lake maps anglers buy are made using data provided in part through Sport Fish Restoration funds.”

Skrypek says Minnesota’s federal Sport Fish Restoration funds are applied toward:

- buying land
- planning
- managing trout and salmon
- buying and building fishing piers
- reclaiming lakes and developing lake habitat
- improving stream habitat
- placing aerators at selected lakes
- teaching people about fishing and fish ecology
- conducting research
- improving and repairing hatcheries
- buying land for and building boat-launching sites
- mapping lakes
- conducting biological surveys



- conducting environmental reviews
- rearing muskellunge and northern pike.

“Nearly all the federal fish restoration money gets out of the office onto the ground,” says Skrypek. “In Minnesota, less than 10 percent is earmarked for administration. At the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service level, less than 4 percent of tax revenues go to administer the nationwide program.”

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