

Bay Shore plant not only Erie fishery foe Steve Pollick, Toledo Blade



FirstEnergy Corp.'s Bay Shore power plant has been faulted for killing young fish when they are drawn into its water intake. The company has proposed a reverse louver system on the intake.

(THE BLADE/AMY E.

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You cannot compare apples to oranges, and therein lies the rub when it comes to assessing the impact of fish kills at Bay Shore Power Plant on Maumee Bay.

It is known as the fish-killingest plant in Ohio, more than all other power plants combined. And that sounds pretty damning.

An environmental coalition recently contended that the kills cause nearly \$30 million a year in economic loss to northwest Ohio, that the plant took out 46 million "adult" fish and 14 million juvenile fish based on sampling in 2005 and 2006. That raises serious questions, especially when it will be electric rate-payers - all of us First Energy customers - who eventually would pick up the tab for a \$100 million cooling tower, which is what the coalition seeks as a way to eliminate 95 percent of fish kills.

Would it be worth the cost, that is, will it "save" Lake Erie fisheries?

Say "Lake Erie fish," and what image forms in your mind's eye? A 15-inch or better "keeper" walleye? An eight-inch, fish-fry-ready yellow perch? A 14-inch smallmouth bass? Thought so. Weren't thinking about emerald shiners, gizzard shad, white perch, white bass, spottail shiners, and freshwater drum [sheepshead], were you? Yet those species constitute 45 million of the 46 million "adult" fish that were killed by Bay Shore during the 2005-2006 sampling.

The breakdown of the fish totals include 24 million emerald shiners, the ultimate Lake Erie baitfish, some 14.3 million gizzard shad, and 4.7 million white perch, the latter two, by the way, being invasive species. White bass amounted to 1.5 million, spottails 313,000, and sheepshead 225,000. There are 93,000 round gobies, another infamous invasive pest, listed as victims of the plant.

For perspective, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission estimates that there are at least 2.5 billion forage fish - the shad and shiners and a few others - in the western basin of Lake Erie alone. Are these losses worth paying for a \$100 million cooling tower? Moreover, are these losses significant in solving Lake Erie water-quality and fisheries ills?

Run down the kill list to walleye, you find nearly 78,000 killed. Weigh that against an annual hook-and-line kill by sport fishermen in Ohio waters of about a million, for fish at least 15 inches long, not pint-sized juveniles. And Canadian gillnetters take another million walleye. The yellow perch number for the plant is 123,000, and that must be weighed against a sport and commercial Ohio catch between four and five million and a Canadian take of eight to 10 million.

Nor do those numbers tell the whole story. For walleye listed, 60 percent were less than two inches long and 22 percent were less than four inches. Fisheries biologists will tell you that a keeper-size walleye simply will swim away from the plant's intake. Fully 20 percent of yellow perch were less than four inches and 53 percent less than six inches.

A case has been made about losing some 4,400 smallmouth bass at the plant. Of those, 44 per cent were less than four inches and 50 percent under six inches. In the wild the mortality on such young fish itself is high.

The plant also is listed as killing 14 million juvenile fish in the sampling period; those would be under two to three inches. And two billion larval fish [most of which First Energy contends are dead already].

Here is some perspective from Ray Petering, executive administrator for fish management and research for the Ohio Division of Wildlife:

The state raises a hybrid sauger-walleye cross in its hatcheries for stocking in inland impoundments. Optimum conditions are maintained in a hatchery to maximize survival and production - in the wild, untold billions of hatchlings and fry die right off the bat and never even reach the 1 1/2- to 2-inch fingerling stage. Fingerlings are considered stocking size. But just two to five out of every 100 stocked grow up to catchable size.

In other words, a very, very low percentage of fish that hatch ever reach keeper size. That's why fish broadcast so many thousands of eggs so that some survive to reproduce. But each stage of development sees a given year-class decimated by the elements. It is one survival strategy from evolution, the other being to take very good care of very few young.

When it comes to fish losses at Bay Shore, "we're not talking about adult fish here," stated Petering. As for applying state restitution values to Bay Shore-killed fish, such as the juvenile smallmouth bass at \$50 a pop, it doesn't wash, the fish administrator said. The reason is, Bay Shore has a permit to operate.

A farmer polluting a creek and killing fish with liquid feedlot manure, and poachers who exceed the daily creel limit do not have permits to do that. That is why they get nailed for restitution under the state administrative code.

Plant opponents might frame that as a license to kill fish, and in a sense it is true. Just like every factory with an outlet pipe in a river or a smokestack in the sky has a license to pollute water and air - within limits. Such permits recognize a damage and a liability in trade for the products, such as electric power, that factories produce.

Bottom line, as far as Petering is concerned, "Bay Shore could be doing better and we need to keep holding their feet to the fire. But the plant's effect on Lake Erie? Not there."

Mike Shelton, chief of external affairs for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the wildlife division's parent agency, notes that the department is "paying attention to the issue" of Bay Shore and fish kills. But he notes that the authority over the plant and its operating permit lie with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, not the ODNR.

Shelton said that OEPA is seeking a 40 to 80 percent reduction in fish-kill impact via conditions it plans to attach to the Bay Shore permit, which is up for renewal. If that is achieved, the situation would be "much improved," the chief said, noting that this is the first time the OEPA has "stepped up" with fish-kill conditions in the operating permit.

But Shelton took note that in its 55-year history, the lake's fisheries have had good years and bad, and the fishing has cycled good and bad. So, "[Bay Shore] overall does not seem to have an impact on the average fisherman."

Even First Energy acknowledges a need to reduce fish-kills. "We realize there is a problem at the plant but we want to focus on a workable solution..." said Mark Durbin, a company spokesman. The company solution is to try installing "reverse louvers" on the water intake for \$500,000. It is asking for a year's trial and three years to build and fully operate if the trial is a success.

Overall, Petering is much more concerned with strategic problems, ones much more subtle and broad, revolving around water quality and habitat and minimizing the influx of such invasive pests as zebra and quagga mussels, gobies, and lampreys. These are subtle issues and not an easily fixed target, like a fish-killing power plant.

"With the walleye we have a species that has thrived for a long time. If we take care of the lake, then they'll do just fine. We have to focus on water quality and habitat. Then everyone wins," said Petering.

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Kevin Newsome, longtime state wildlife officer assigned to Lucas County, has been promoted to the post of wildlife officer supervisor.

Newsome, a native of Clyde, is a 1997 graduate of Hocking College, where he earned an associate's degree in fish and wildlife management. He lives in Lucas County with his wife and daughter.

He was the county's wildlife officer since 2001 and previously was a seasonal employee for the wildlife division for four years. As supervisor of law enforcement Unit B of Wildlife District 2, Newsome will oversee operations in Erie, Fulton, Lucas, Ottawa, Sandusky, and Wood counties. Newsome replaces Officer Gino Barna who took over the duties of law enforcement supervisor of the Lake Erie law enforcement unit based in Sandusky.

In related news, Cody Klima, 23, was named to replace Newsome in Lucas County. Klima is a native of Ottawa in Putnam County and is a 2005 graduate of Pandora-Gilboa High School. He also is a 2008 graduate of the University of Toledo, earning a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. He began his state wildlife career as an officer-at-large in Wildlife District 5 in southwest Ohio after graduating from the Ohio Wildlife Officer Academy in July, 2009.

Also, Reid Van Cleve, 38, was named as the new wildlife officer assigned to Ottawa County, after the retirement of Ottawa County Wildlife Officer John Waltos.

Van Cleve is from Evansville, Ind, and is a 1997 graduate of Vincennes University. He began as a state wildlife officer assigned to Monroe County in 2007 after graduating from the Ohio Wildlife Officer Academy.

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