

# ODWC to support trout stream in Lower Illinois

## Future of fishery still in doubt

OKLAHOMA CITY - The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation recently secured a more stable water-use permit to support a trout fishery in western Sequoyah County below the Lake Tenkiller dam.

However, the new permit from the Oklahoma Water Resources Board doesn't solve the agency's principal problem: no stable water source to support the trout stream.

The regular permit will replace a temporary water-use permit that previously had to be renewed every three months, said Jim Burroughs, streams supervisor with the Wildlife Department. "The only thing the new permit does is eliminate the need for me to repeatedly submit an application for a 90-day temporary permit."

The OWRB last month approved an application from the ODWC for a regular permit to use water released from the Lake Tenkiller dam. The stream water is authorized for "sustaining the minimum flow needed for the trout fishery in the Lower Illinois River" approximately five miles northeast of Gore, the permit specifies.

Each year, the Wildlife Department uses about 11,000 acre-feet of the water that is released through the reservoir's dam, just enough to keep the trout alive, according to Burroughs.

An acre-foot is equivalent to 325,851 gallons of water per year, enough to inundate an acre of land to a depth of one foot.

The 11,000 acre-feet is all the water the Wildlife Department has rights to, Burroughs said.

"We need more and would use more if we had more rights, but the permit from the Water Resources Board doesn't give us more rights without the storage," he said.

The stream water permit issued by the Water Board stipulates that the Wildlife Department must obtain a contract from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for use of the storage from Lake Tenkiller within three years, by mid-May 2019.

The Corps designed and built the reservoir, manages the lake and issues the storage contracts.

The Southwestern Power Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Energy, owns 93 percent of the storage rights in Lake Tenkiller, Burroughs said.

The remaining 7 percent of the storage rights are maxxed out, Burroughs indicated. Those

storage rights total 25,400 acre-feet per year, Corps records reflect. The rights have been awarded to 33 entities that include the Tahlequah Public Works Authority, Gore Public Works Authority, Tenkiller Utility Co., rural water districts such as Cherokee County Rural Water Districts No. 13 and No. 2, plus industrial users and commercial entities such as Fin & Feather Resort and Greenleaf Nursery Co.

"It's important to let anglers know there is no water allocated for this trout stream and no storage available to give us," Burroughs stressed.

For several years, the ODWC has supported its trout fishery by "borrowing" Tenkiller water that previously was allocated to the former Sequoyah Fuels uranium processing plant at Gore. That facility was constructed by Kerr-McGee Corp. and began operations about 1970, but has since been decommissioned and has sat idle since 1993.

Sequoyah Fuels' share was later reassigned to the Sequoyah County Water Association, according to Burroughs. Consequently, the ODWC now "borrows" some of the Tenkiller water from the SCWA's share, he indicated.

The trout stream exists "because the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Corps of Engineers and the Southwestern Power Administration are working together, and in large part thanks to water storage that's donated to us" by Tenkiller Utility Authority and the Sequoyah County Water Association, Burroughs said.

Each year, the Wildlife Department stocks the Lower Illinois River with about 120,000 rainbow and brown trout that are raised primarily in federal fish hatcheries.

Trout are cold-water fish. In Oklahoma, trout can thrive in water temperatures of as much as 58 degrees up to 65 degrees, Burroughs said. But water that heats up to 70 degrees is "the upper limit," Burroughs said; at that level the fish become lethargic.

"Without question, the new permit is nice to have," Burroughs said. Nevertheless, "The future of this summer's trout fishery is in doubt" because of Lake Tenkiller water demands. "With no water allocated for the trout stream, will it be able to continue as a trout fishery?"

Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality ledgers indicate:

- TPWA supplies drinking water to approximately 18,000 people in and around the municipality.
- The Gore PWA sells potable water to approximately 1,700 people.
- The Sequoyah County Water Association, based in Sallisaw, provides potable water to a population of 13,460 via 5,700 residential meters. The SCWA also sells treated water to the Town of Vian, a community of approximately 1,300 residents, and to Sequoyah County Rural Water District No. 5, which serves approximately 1,075 people via 430 customer water meters.
- Tenkiller Utility Co. is based in Park Hill and serves a population of about 860 via 344

residential water meters.

- Cherokee County RWD No. 13, headquartered near Tahlequah, provides drinking water to a population of approximately 2,100.
- Cherokee County RWD No. 2, based at Hulbert, serves a population of approximately 1,550.
- Greenleaf Nursery is a wholesale grower with locations in Oklahoma, Texas and North Carolina. Its nursery at Park Hill occupies more than 600 acres, according to the company website. During peak season, the nursery employs approximately 650 workers who tend to more than 10 million liners and six million finished plants, the company reports.