

# *San Bernardino County Parks trout stocking program continues to degrade*

By JIM MATTHEWS

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The San Bernardino County Regional Parks Department announced the end of November it was going to finally start its trout planting program for anglers at its five urban parks — Mojave Narrows, Glen Helen, Cucamonga-Guasti, Prado, and Yucaipa parks.

The plants were supposed to start Thanksgiving week, and then the plants were suspended at four of the five county parks for Thanksgiving because of weather, with only Mojave Narrows planted.

But the big news in the announcement, the one that all the fishermen noticed on the parks' social media pages, was that parks would be planting the lowest number of trout ever planted each week and that it would charge its highest fees ever.

The weekly plants would consist of only 609 pounds per week (with stocks before each park's annual derby consisting of a double load of 1,218 pounds). Fees for the 2019 season are \$10 per angler Monday through Wednesday and \$12 per angler Thursday through Sunday. Derbies cost \$20 per angler. That is in addition to the \$8 weekday vehicle fee or \$10 weekend fee. For the average working angler, that means it will cost him \$22 to fish one of the parks on a weekend day.

By way of comparison, it was just five years ago the county was planting 175,000 pounds of trout per year in the same five lakes, or about 35,000 pounds per month during the five-month season. This year, if the agency plants through March at the same weekly volume, it will only plant about 65,000 pounds total over four months at 16,000 pounds per month (this includes the double stocking for the five tournaments averaged in). During the 2014-15 season, the plants were averaging about 1,500 pounds per week per lake — more than double the plants this season.

Park entrance fees (both vehicle and fishing) are up about \$2 each between 2014 and 2019.

While this is the biggest cause for the parks' declining revenue and participation, there are other factors that explain why use during the fishing season has plummeted.

A state fishing is also required to fish the county park lakes. The cost jumps each year, adding \$51.02 to the cost of the trip (or just \$16.46 for a one-day license, neither of which is available at the park) this season.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife also stocks fewer rainbow trout at all the county park lakes than it ever has planted. It was not that long ago, that most of the park

lakes received DFW plants of about 1,000 pounds every other week. Today, once a month plants — at lower poundages averaging 400 to 500 pounds — are the norm for the DFW.

Another part of the problem is that the price and delivery of live trout has increased from private hatcheries that can serve California. Most of that is due to skyrocketing feed costs, but environmental regulations have also

really increased the growers' costs. Still, those increases in trout costs should have been more than offset by the increase of fishing fees at the parks. Those fees skyrocketed over the last 30 years, far outpacing inflation.

An old newspaper story written from 1983 when San Bernardino County was just beginning its more aggressive stocking program. That year, the parks started planting 1,000 pounds per week at Yucaipa, and 1,000 pounds every other week at the other three parks in the Inland Empire (Glen Helen, Cucamonga-Guasti, and Prado). The program began the first week of November and continued into April. Cost for a fishing permit was dropped from \$3 to \$2.50 that year, and per vehicle fees were just \$2. So it cost \$4.50 to fish on a weekend then. Even if you factor in cumulative inflation from that era, it should only cost about \$12 to fish at the parks today.

This clearly is a management problem.

During San Bernardino County Park's peak years for fishing and park use in the 1990s and early 2000s, the money generated not only paid for the fishing program, it paid for the *entire* parks operating program. That is worth repeating: User fees during the fishing season paid for the park's entire operation with money to spare.

Today, user fees pay for about 60 percent of the parks' operating expenses — even at the exorbitant rates now charged to visitors. When the parks were successful in selling their services, they were run by Tom Potter. Coming from

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the private business world, Potter understood that people will pay for a good product. Under Potter, San Bernardino parks were stealing anglers from the high dollar private lakes with trophy trout and heavy trout stocking programs.

How? The fishing was as good at the parks, it cost less to fish, and they were close to home. Since Potter retired, the parks have been in a long, slow, dramatic decline — and not just with fishing.

This is a simple fix. If the county contracted for 1,200 pounds of trout per lake per week and went to a single \$10 (weekday) or \$12 (weekend) fishing/entrance fee (combining the two passes), the visitation would increase enough to not only cover the cost of the increased plants, but also increase the late-fall/winter revenue. It would increase enough to raise the percent of the parks budget paid by fees.

Would it get back up to providing 100 percent of the operating fees?

Maybe not, simply because of cost of trout is greater by several magnitudes today. It would, however, cover its cost and make more money for parks. Perhaps, after a season or two of building anglers' confidence back up in the program, it would even bump fee revenue up 10 or 15 percent. Wouldn't that be worth the effort? Wouldn't it be worth it to have more people using those parks in this off season? (And for the upwardly mobile bureaucrat, you can say that you were the one who boosted park visitation and revenues. What a boost for the resume!)

Currently, Santa Ana River Lakes — a private fishing lake in Orange County — is charging \$29 per angler to fish its lakes, and it is very busy on weekends because the owners stock the heck out of the lake with trout, including big trout. Plants are frequently 3,000 pounds or more before holiday weekends like this one. They post video on-line of all their plants, so anglers can see the volume and size of the trout planted. It is impressive. And

to top it off, a state fishing license is also not required at this lake.

So why would an angler pay \$22 to fish a San Bernardino County Park lake to have a feeble shot at 600 pounds of fish?

No one at county park management is apparently even asking this question, and it shows in angler use numbers. The

current bureaucratic solution is to increase fees and reduce services, and then blame the declines in fishermen and revenue somewhere else instead of looking in a mirror.

This is the version of this story ran in *Western Outdoor News* on December 10, 2020. After the story ran, the editor received this letter from Betha Davis, the current director of San Bernardino County Park. It ran in the January 24 edition of the weekly newspaper:

Dear *Western Outdoor News*,

This letter is in response to an article published on Dec. 10 by Jim Matthews. San Bernardino County Regional Parks continues its dedication to providing opportunities to park users to participate in the sport of fishing in local communities. To support these efforts, we have allocated \$500,000 to fund the cost of stocking both catfish and trout at the following Regional Parks: Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Mojave Narrows, Prado and Yucaipa. There are a total of 10 lakes located at these facilities.

Trout are stocked Thanksgiving through the

first weekend in April and catfish are stocked Memorial Day through the second weekend in September. The stocking schedule has not changed.

Entry and fishing fees have not been raised since May 2017, and there are no plans to raise these fees during the upcoming fiscal year. I would also like to clarify that entry fees into Regional Parks are by ve-

## FISH BY THE NUMBERS

### REGIONAL PARKS LAKE STOCKING



- Normal lake stock is 609 lbs.
- Derby stock is 1,218 lbs.\*

### 2020 Lake Stocking Dates

#### JANUARY

- Jan. 2, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Jan. 9, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Jan. 16, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- \*Jan. 17, 2020 - Glen Helen, Derby Stocking
- Jan. 23, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Jan. 30, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows

#### FEBRUARY

- Feb. 6, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Feb. 13, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Feb. 20, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- Feb. 27, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado & Yucaipa
- \*Feb. 28, 2020 - Mojave Narrows, Derby Stocking

#### MARCH

- March 5, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- March 12, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- March 19, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado & Mojave Narrows
- \*March 20, 2020 - Yucaipa, Derby Stocking
- March 26, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Prado, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows

#### APRIL

- April 2, 2020 - Cucamonga-Guasti, Glen Helen, Yucaipa & Mojave Narrows
- \*April 3, 2020 - Prado, Derby Stocking



Regional Parks

Contact us at 909.387.2757 or email [parks@parks.sbcounty.gov](mailto:parks@parks.sbcounty.gov)

hicle. So if multiple fishermen are in the same car, the entry cost per person is less. In addition, we also allow pedestrians to walk into our parks at a cost of \$3 per person. In reference to fishing fees, these funds are used to supplement the cost of the fishing program, which includes costs associated with stocking.

Comparing how revenue was used and raised 10-15 years ago should not be done without including or discussing inflation and how the economy has changed since that time. Revenue generated from the current fishing program supplements the costs of this program only and does not cover the entire cost of the program. Despite this fact, the Regional Parks Department has committed to funding this program without passing these costs onto our users.

The Regional Parks Department follows San Bernardino County's procurement system to secure eligible vendors that are able to stock our lakes. This system includes a competitive bid process to ensure that all policies are being followed. As part of this process, Park staff research and locate vendors throughout both the state of California and in other states. These vendors all receive notification when the bid will be released and are asked to submit proposals.

In previous years we have received proposals from multiple vendors. This competition has helped to keep stocking costs at a lower price. Unfortunately, this year we only received one bid from a vendor whose costs were higher than in previous years. Despite this additional cost to the County, we are not passing these costs onto our park visitors. In addition, the Department continues to work with the State, our non-profit partner, FOR Parks, and other community partners to provide additional resources that ensure the continuation of Fishing Derbies (All ages/Youth) and Adult/Youth Fishing Workshops.

Moving forward we would like to invite you to work with us. If you have ideas or suggestions, would like to volunteer, or help with fundraising through FOR Parks, please e-mail us at [parks@parks.sbcounty.gov](mailto:parks@parks.sbcounty.gov)

Sincerely,

Beahta Davis, Director

San Bernardino County Regional Parks

**The following is the response that ran in *Western Outdoor News*, along with Davis letter:**

A half-million dollars (\$500,000) and what do you get?

Just 609 pounds of trout per week at five San Bernardino County Parks per week from Thanksgiving through early April and an unknown number of catfish per week from Memorial weekend through early September. Of course the park entry and fishing fees don't pay for the program any longer -- they plant half as many fish and charge more today

as they did when they planted twice as many fish.

The Parks management didn't provide use numbers. If they did, it would show that fishing users have declined by dramatic amounts. That results in a decline in revenue.

The Parks management didn't say why only one vendor bid on their contract, charging the county over a third more per pound for trout than other vendors in the state charge for the volume of trout San Bernardino County Parks buys.

The Parks management has no idea what percent of the trout or catfish planted return to the angler bag, so they have no way of measuring if the vendors are delivering the number and poundage of fish claimed or if they are providing quality fish that return to the angler's creel.

Read between the lines of the director's letter. They confirm everything Jim Matthews wrote. But WON's Jim Matthews isn't one to just complain. At the end to the story, Matthews had a segment that didn't run in our newspaper. Here's what Matthews' wrote:

***"I said that I would bet the director's salary the problem could be fixed easily. That's not putting my skin in the game, is it? If the parks department would be willing to hire me, I'd bet my entire annual consulting fee I could increase revenue by providing more trout while reducing fishing and/or entrance fees. I know a lot of other 'consultants' who would make parks the same offer."***

***"Would parks be willing to give me just one of the five parks as a test case? I could make Mojave Narrows or Glen Helen hum with activity this time of year."***

***"Or maybe the parks management could just look up what Tom Potter was doing back in the early 2000s and copy his playbook."***

#### **One final fact not in the original story:**

— San Bernardino County Parks received only one bid on its 2019-2020 stocking contract. The price of the fish it was forced to buy was about a third higher than other hatcheries charge at \$6-plus per pound versus just over \$4-plus dollars per pound.