

ACROSS COUNTY LINES: Vandal poisons thousands of young salmon at Oregon hatchery



If it happens in Douglas County, it can happen anywhere.

REEDSPORT, Ore. — Nearly 18,000 young salmon died after a vandal poured bleach into a Douglas County fish hatchery tank on Monday, according to law enforcement authorities.

What may have started as vandalism evolved into poaching with the illegal killing of fish in one of four tanks at the Gardiner, Reedsport, and Winchester Bay (GRWB) Salmon Trout Enhancement Program (STEP) hatchery in Reedsport.

Douglas County Sheriff's Office (DCSO) Deputies arrested Joshua Heckathorn, 20, of Gardiner, and lodged him at the Douglas County Jail on charges of Burglary II, Criminal Trespass and Criminal Mischief. According to an agency news release, on Apr. 23, a DCSO patrol deputy saw

Heckathorn walking south along Highway 101, then encountered him again that evening behind a locked gate in the hatchery facility. Heckathorn admitted to trespassing on the property, entering a storage location, and handling the chemical bottle on Monday.

In a cooperative law enforcement effort, DCSO and Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division will collaborate efforts to address both vandalism on the property and a significant poaching incident, according to OSP F and W Sergeant Levi Harris.

"The Douglas County Sheriff's Office has been a great partner for the OSP F and W Division," Harris said, "Their enthusiasm and professionalism is very much appreciated. Their coastal deputies have helped solve cases and/or held wildlife violators for us a number of times here in Western Douglas County."

Poaching charges will include Unlawful Taking Chinook Salmon for 17,890 fish, which raised the charge to a Class C felony. In addition, Heckathorn faces charges of Making a Toxic Substance Available to Wildlife, which is a Class A Misdemeanor; and Criminal Mischief 1st Degree (Damaging or destroying property of another in an amount exceeding \$1,000). Additional penalties could include a lifetime angling license suspension and damage suits for unlawful killing of wildlife.

The maximum civil penalty in Oregon for illegal take of a single Chinook salmon is \$750. Courts have the authority to multiply that amount by the number of fish taken, with a judgement in this case potentially raising the amount to over \$13 million, according to Sergeant Harris. Although it is unlikely to elevate to that level, the case represents a significant loss to the STEP program.

"The killing of these fish is a real blow to the STEP Program Volunteers, ODFW, fishermen, and the community as a whole," Sergeant Harris said, "In my 25 years as a game warden, this is one of the most senseless acts I have seen."

Oregon legislators created the STEP Program in 1981, to give volunteers and others passionate about fish a way to contribute their time and effort. In the time since, thousands of volunteers have assisted Oregon's fisheries with materials, equipment, and countless hours of time and labor. STEP volunteers complete stream habitat restoration work, conduct surveys, educate the public, and hatch and rear salmon and trout eggs.

The estimated 18,000 fish lost contribute to the lower Umpqua River fall Chinook fishery and would have joined approximately 60,000 other fall Chinook pre-smolts that will be fin clipped and released in June. At Elk River Hatchery, about 60,000 fall Chinook of the same cohort is scheduled for release as smolts in Winchester Bay in early October.

This incident doesn't make sense to volunteers and others who raise the fish, according to Deborah Yates, President of the GRWB STEP program.

"You get attached to those fish," Yates said, "When nature does something, it's crushing. But it's nature and it happens. But when someone comes in and does something like this, you can't wrap your head around it. We have so many hours wrapped up in those fish, to have someone come in so cavalier, and kill them, it doesn't make sense."

"The volunteers have spent hundreds of hours raising those fish," Yates said, "It's an incredible time investment, and they mean a lot to people."

The Protect Oregon's Wildlife- Turn in Poachers campaign educates the public on how to recognize and report poaching. This campaign is a collaboration among state agencies, sportsmen and other conservationists, landowners, and recreationists to engage the public in combatting Oregon's poaching problem. Our goal is to:

Incentivize reporting on wildlife crimes through the TIP Line; Strengthen enforcement by increasing the number of OSP Fish and Wildlife Troopers; and Support prosecution in becoming an effective deterrent. The campaign helps to protect and enhance Oregon's fish and wildlife and their habitat for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Contact campaign coordinator Yvonne Shaw for more information. Yvonne.L.Shaw [at] odfw.oregon.gov ().

If you know of or suspect other crimes against fish wildlife or habitat, please report to the Turn In Poachers (TIP) Line. 1-800-452-7888 or *OSP (*677) from a mobile phone. Or email: [TIP \[at\] osp.oregon.gov](mailto:TIP@osp.oregon.gov).