

'Rock snot' shuts hatchery

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — Fear that an invasive algae species known as "rock snot" might have contaminated a Vermont fish hatchery has prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to donate thousands of Atlantic salmon to native American tribes in the Northeast to prevent a possible spread of the specimen.

On Thursday, the Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Commission voted unanimously to remove the salmon from the federal Bethel Fish Hatchery, clean them and donate them to the tribes so the facility can be closed and cleaned.

The algae, believed to be transported by anglers moving from one body of water to another, pose no threat to human health. But rock snot can overwhelm cold water lakes and streams and biologists fear the Vermont hatchery could be contaminated with the algae because it is known to be present in the White River, the waterway that damaged the hatchery during the August flooding.

"These are very valuable fish. Traditionally they would be used to further the efforts of restoration of Atlantic salmon to the Connecticut River basin," Bill Hyatt, the director of the Connecticut Bureau of Natural Resources and the chairman of the Connecticut River salmon commission, said Thursday. "Unfortunately, with the contamination of didymo at the facility, it makes it totally impossible to use the fish in that manner."

The hatchery also contains about 434,000 lake trout destined for lakes Ontario and Erie. A separate decision about whether those fish can be safely released without spreading rock snot, or whether they will have to be disposed of, is expected later this month.

The Atlantic salmon at the Bethel hatchery are part of a Fish and Wildlife Service program that is working to restore the species to its traditional habitat along the Connecticut River. Historically, the fish hatch in the tributaries and young salmon swim downstream into the Atlantic Ocean, where they remain for several years before returning to the streams where they were hatched to spawn.

The salmon habitat on many of those rivers was destroyed by European settlers who built power dams that prevented the fish from reaching their spawning grounds.

Over the last 10 to 15 years didymo has been found across North America. It is thought to be transported on fishing gear. A number of states, including Vermont, have outlawed felt-soled fishing waders thought to be easy carriers of the algae.

