

# Trout Deal Bad For Pa. Growers

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Two Pennsylvania trout farms bid on parts of the contract, which was offered to bidders piecemeal as part of a line-item bidding process. The bidding took place in June, with trout suppliers allowed to enter bids on any or all of the 96 trout stockings.

Bid invitations were sent to trout growers in March, along with a list of requirements to assure that the contracted fish are healthy and safe. The requirements included stipulations that the fish pass the state's PCB protocol, show no clinical signs of disease, and be certified free of enteric redmouth (ERM) disease.

In late May, DGS issued a list of changes to the original rules. Among them was the addition of a requirement to test annually for several other disease-causing pathogens. The bidding date was

extended from June 4 to June 11.

Laurel Hill Trout Farm, Rockwood, Somerset County, was one of the Pennsylvania bidders, submitting bids for 27 percent of the specified trout, Kane said.

Bob Pritts, owner of Laurel Hill Trout Farm, said that the fact there was no minimum number of trout stockings that a bidder could win and no way to make an accurate determination of compliance costs hindered his ability to bid competitively.

Pritts produces about 100,000 pounds of trout per year, mostly for stocking in private waters in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Compliance costs would have become more affordable in supplying a large number of fish, but a small number would have been a losing proposition, according to Pritts.

"If I would have gotten just a

couple bids, I couldn't have afforded to do the compliance work," Pritts said. "It was hard to factor in a price because you didn't know how many fish you would actually get."

Disease testing in North Carolina is handled for free by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service out of its Georgia office, according to Tom Ort, Tellico manager.

In Pennsylvania, however, trout growers must foot the bill for the disease tests, at a cost of "thousands of dollars," according to Renee Eckley, president of Limestone Springs Fishing Preserve and PAA board member.

Eckley said she attended the bidding meeting, but decided not to bid because of the uncertainty of the compliance costs.

"I would have bid if I could have bid competitively," she said.

For PCB compliance, Tellico will have to pay about \$4,000 per

year — like any other fish supplier would have — for having the fish tested by the state of Pennsylvania. That testing is required on five samples of eight fish each, according to Ort.

Economies of scale and ideal trout-growing conditions in western North Carolina are the main reasons for Tellico's competitive advantage, Ort said.

Tellico produces 2.2 million fingerling trout in their hatchery and 280,000 pounds of larger fish annually, some of which go for sport stockings like these in Pennsylvania.

Pritts said that there had been discussions with the PFBC prior to bidding about requiring a minimum of 20,000 trout being awarded to individual bidders.

But according to Rick Hoopes, Pennsylvania director of fisheries, a state purchasing rule disallows such a provision.

Hoopes noted that all bidders

were notified equally of all the bidding rules and any changes that occurred.

Dennis Guise, PFBC executive director and chief counsel, agreed that there was no discrimination in the bidding process.

"Everybody was on a level playing field as far as submitting bids," he said.

Kane, of the Department General Services, said that bids from the Pennsylvania fisheries were "more than double, sometimes, the price of the bid that won."

The five-year contracting is a PFBC pilot program designed "to see if it is feasible for us to get fish from commercial sources to augment production," said Tom Cochran, PFBC biologist.

The PFBC has historically stocked about 5.2 million trout per year in Pennsylvania waters from its own hatcheries. That number is now about 4 million, according to Cochran.

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Of the major producing States, Illinois and Ohio are expecting record yields. Yields are also forecast at record highs in 8 other States located mostly in the

Southeast. Soybean production is forecast at 2.45 billion bushels, down 1 percent from the October forecast and 11 percent below 2002. If realized, this would be the lowest production since 1996.

Based on conditions as of November 1, yields are expected to average 33.8 bushels per acre, down 0.2 bushel from October and down 4.2 bushels from 2002.

As harvest progressed, producers realized yield decreases from last month in South Dakota, upper Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes, and eastern Corn Belt. However, in Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, the Tennessee Valley, and along the Atlantic Coastal Plains, yield prospects increased from last month. Area for harvest is forecast at 72.5 million acres, unchanged from last month but up fractionally from 2002.

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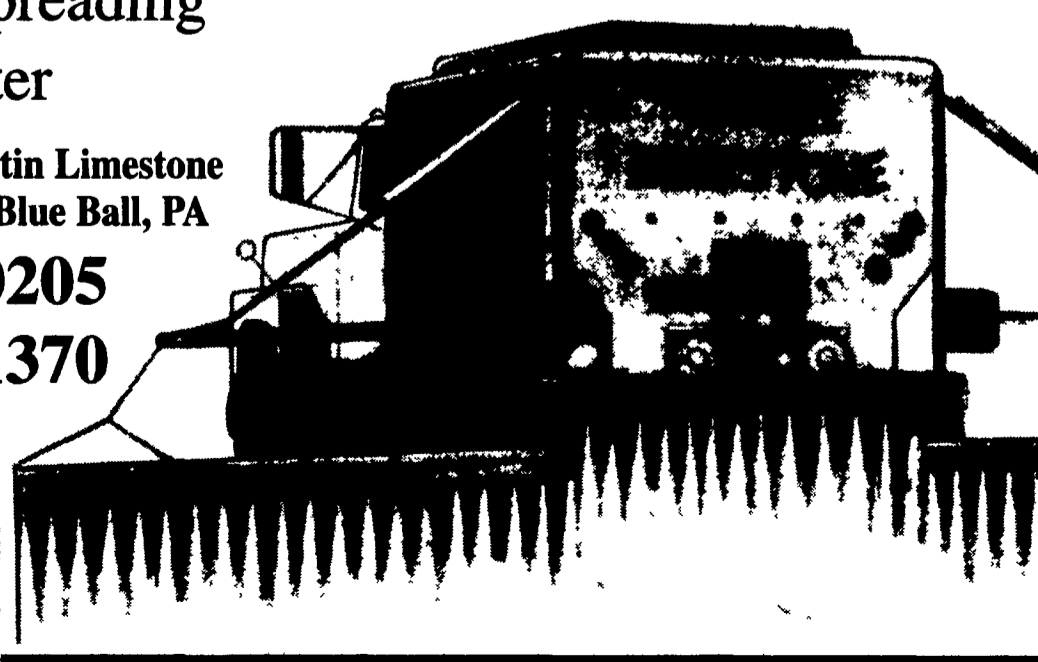
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