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Raising flounder One-of-a-kind South Brunswick program gives fish a population a boost

By Mike Marsh
Star-News Correspondent

At South Brunswick High School, some students are learning about much more than the "Three Rs." "F" is a good letter for the school's 86 aquaculture students because it stands for "Flounder."

In the first program of its kind in the nation, the school's aquaculture program is raising flounder and has a permit to release the fish into the wild waters of Brunswick County.

"I went to David Long, my business partner," said Tim Barefoot of Barefoot Rods and Tackle in Wilmington. "I told him what I wanted to accomplish in creating a flounder hatchery. He is politically active. My dad took me flounder fishing when I was a kid and now I have two sons. Austin is 8 and Taylor is 12 and they love to fish for flounder."

Fishery managers say the population of southern flounder -- the species most common at inshore areas -- is in trouble from overharvest. Regulations are becoming increas-

ingly restrictive for commercial and recreational anglers who catch flounder.

Once Barefoot told Long he had applied for a grant from North Carolina Sea Grant, but was turned down because the proposal was poorly written, Long turned to the political process for funding. The legislature eventually approved \$18,000 for the hatchery. The Brunswick County School Board then exceeded the required matching-funds basis by tossing in another \$31,000.

"It's an opportunity that I hadn't even thought of until Tim and Barry brought it to my attention," said SBHS principal Bob Wilkerson. "One I thought about it, I knew it would be a tremendous benefit for fishermen who like to fish for flounder. Once we show we can have a positive impact on that species, maybe others will follow our example. This area is all about fishing. We can deplete the ocean. We have to think about it as a lake. If we can make students more environmentally sensitive, they will do things that are environmentally

sound throughout their lives."

Barry Bey is the head of the school's aquaculture program. He received lots of assistance from UNCW and North Carolina State University in jump starting the first hatch.

"Dr. Wade Watanabe spawned the fish at the UNCW facility at Wrightsville Beach," Bey said. "We hatched the eggs and learned how to raise the fish from Wade. My kids and I designed the hatchery system. Some of it is our own design and some of it was copied from the UNCW aquaculture facility."

Once the flounder hatch, they are kept alive in saltwater tanks equipped with piping, pumps and filters designed to imitate an ocean environment.

They are fed algae and rotifers, microscopic marine plants and animals that must also be grown at the facility. By the second or third week, the flounder are large enough to eat brine shrimp a fraction of an inch in length.

"The idea was to release the flounder once they reached 2 or 3 inches in length," Bey said. "But we decided to grow them to about 4 inches by

feeding them pellet food. That way, we will have the experience to grow them to larger sizes."

The school has a permit from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries to release up to 25,000 flounder this year. While the first release, scheduled for July at Bluewater Point Marina at Oak Island, will consist of only a few fish, a second batch of fish should achieve that number by this fall. The permit must be reissued annually for any future stockings.

That number of fish is insignificant in shoring up wild fish populations. But Barefoot is hoping that raising and releasing flounder will heighten awareness about their importance.

"It's the No. 1 fish, bar none, among recreational saltwater fishermen," Barefoot said. "I want to send a message to our lawmakers, fishery managers and everyone else about how important saving our flounder is to this part of the state. Southeastern North Carolina is nationally known as one of the best places to catch a trophy flounder. I would like to see it stay that way for my kids."