

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 7, 2026

The Honorable Brian R. Nesvik
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Nesvik,

Since the 1980s, the White River National Fish Hatchery has contributed to the restoration of native fish species in Lake Champlain, the Connecticut River, and the Great Lakes. Despite recent investments and a proven record of success, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) apparently intends to place the hatchery on inactive status. We urge you to reconsider this decision and to provide a briefing to our staff on USFWS's plans for the facility by October 30, 2026.

Lake Champlain once supported thriving populations of landlocked Atlantic salmon and lake trout, each of which disappeared by 1900 amid stress from nearby settlement runoff and dam construction. In 1972, Vermont and New York began working to restore the fisheries. USFWS opened the White River hatchery in 1984 to provide federal support for these efforts, which have only grown more critical since the introduction of aquatic invasive species like sea lamprey.

Tropical Storm Irene severely damaged the hatchery in 2011, forcing a prolonged closure and a \$2.4 million renovation project before it could reopen in 2017.¹ During that closure, the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Fish Hatchery in North Chittenden, VT filled the gap, underscoring the importance of redundancy in the National Fish Hatchery System. As extreme weather grows more frequent and severe, maintaining both facilities is necessary to the system's resilience against future natural disasters.

Fishery restoration efforts have made real progress. In 2016, USFWS discovered the first wild-hatched Atlantic salmon fry in the Winooski River—the first in 150 years.² The following year, researchers documented a second sighting of fry in Vermont and the first sighting in New York's Boquet River. In 2023, USFWS recorded the highest number of Atlantic salmon encountered at the Chase Mill hydroelectric dam on the Winooski River in 30 years.³ Meanwhile, sea lamprey control—led by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in partnership with USFWS, the Vermont

¹ *After Six Years, Hatchery Back At It*, The White River Valley Herald (Jul. 13, 2017) (online at: <https://www.ourherald.com/articles/after-six-years-hatchery-back-at-it/>).

² Lake Champlain Basin Program, *International Year of the Salmon* (online at: <https://www.lcbp.org/our-goals/thriving-communities/cultural-heritage/international-year-of-the-salmon-2/>) (accessed Jul. 23, 2026).

Agency of Natural Resources, and the New York Department of Environmental Conservation—significantly reduced lamprey wounding of Atlantic salmon from 79% at the height of the infestation to just 6% in 2022.⁴ The success of lake trout restoration and progress made towards restoring Atlantic salmon populations will bolster the outdoor recreation economy in Vermont and New York.⁵

Last year, the Lake Champlain Fish and Wildlife Management Cooperative⁶ suspended the lake trout stocking program in Lake Champlain.⁷ The White River hatchery nonetheless maintains several critical functions. First, it provides brood stock across Vermont, not just Lake Champlain, complementing the state’s hatchery system. Second, its lake trout program contributes to the Great Lakes. During the spawning season, the facility produces approximately 1 million eggs, which are then raised at the Allegheny National Fish Hatchery for stocking trout in Lakes Erie and Ontario.⁸ This interconnected system promotes genetic diversity, safeguards against disasters, combats disease, and produces viable stock.

Bipartisan majorities in Congress have consistently recognized the value of the National Fish Hatchery System. In FY26, Congress appropriated \$79 million for system operations and an additional \$24.5 million for maintenance and equipment, a nearly \$3.5 million increase in funding compared to FY25.

³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Record number of landlocked Atlantic salmon at Vermont dam highlights restoration success* (online at: <https://www.fws.gov/story/2023-12/record-number-landlocked-atlantic-salmon-vermont-dam-highlights-restoration-success>) (accessed Jul. 23, 2026).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In addition to the sizeable ecological value created, the fishery supports local tourism and small businesses, driving economic activities throughout the region. Sportfishing generated just shy of \$600 million in economic activity in Vermont (\$474 million of which comes from Lake Champlain), supporting more than 3,000 jobs. In the neighboring 21st Congressional District of New York, the industry contributed \$478 million to the economy and supported 2,520 jobs. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Lake trout restoration in Lake Champlain a success* (Apr. 11, 2025) (online at: <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2025-04/lake-trout-restoration-lake-champlain-success>); American Sportfishing Association, *Economic Impacts of Recreational Fishing: Vermont* (online at: <https://asafishing.org/state-reports/economic-impacts-of-recreational-fishing-vermont/>) (accessed Jul. 23, 2026); American Sportfishing Association, *Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing: NY Congressional District 21* (online at: https://asafishing.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025_ASA_House_Handout_Digital_21_New_York.pdf) (accessed Jul. 28, 2026).

⁶ The Lake Champlain Fish and Wildlife Management Cooperative is a joint working group between USFWS, VT ANR’s Department of Fish and Wildlife, and NY DEC.

⁷ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Lake trout restoration in Lake Champlain a success* (Apr. 11, 2025) (online at: <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2025-04/lake-trout-restoration-lake-champlain-success>).

⁸ *Hatchery Staff Helps Stock Champlain, Great Lakes; Welcomes Visitors*, The White River Valley Herald (Apr. 2, 2026) (online at: <https://www.ourherald.com/articles/hatchery-staff-helps-stock-champlain-great-lakes-welcomes-visitors/>).

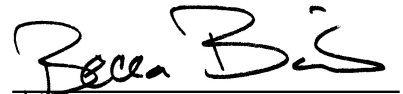
The hatchery is also contributing to ongoing research into thiamine (vitamin B1) deficiency in Atlantic salmon, a threat that emerged after invasive alewives displaced native species in the salmon's diet, impairing salmon fry survival.⁹ The White River hatchery is now working with the Lake Champlain Basin Program, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and other stakeholders to rear salmon resistant to thiamine deficiency.¹⁰ Transferring fish from the hatchery to another USFWS facility risks losing the brood stock and may overburden the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Fish Hatchery, which is already overcrowded. Placing the White River hatchery on inactive status would inhibit novel scientific research, halt the stocking of resistant salmon, and reverse a decade of progress toward fishery restoration.

We understand that USFWS is undertaking a whole-of-service review of National Fish Hatcheries pursuant to your Director's Order No. 230, issued March 31, 2026.¹¹ Before finalizing any determination about the White River facility, we ask that USFWS fully evaluate all facilities in the region to analyze how this action would impact Lake Champlain and long-standing Service priorities. We respectfully request that you stay the decision to put the facility on inactive status and brief our staff on your plans for the hatchery not later than October 30, 2026.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Becca Balint
Member of Congress



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

⁹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *An alewife from Lake Champlain* (online at: <https://www.fws.gov/media/alewife-lake-champlain>) (accessed Jul. 27, 2026).

¹⁰ Lake Champlain Basin Program, *Lake Champlain Atlantic salmon have potential to naturally adapt in response to invasive species impacts* (online at: <https://www.lcbp.org/2021/12/lake-champlain-atlantic-salmon-have-potential-to-naturally-adapt-in-response-to-invasive-species-impacts/>) (accessed Jul. 27, 2026).

¹¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Requirements and Expectations – Review of the National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery System* (Mar. 31, 2026) (online at: <https://www.fws.gov/policy-library/do230>).

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kirsten Gillibrand". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator