

HOOKED ON CONSERVATION

PENNSYLVANIA FFA MEMBERS LEARN ABOUT FISH AND WATER QUALITY ISSUES FIRSTHAND. – By Renee Mulvihill

When small, young channel catfish (also known as fingerlings) arrive at Shanksville-Stonycreek School each October, they are only 1–2 inches long. By the time the central Pennsylvania school's FFA members help release the catfish into nearby Somerset Lake in May, they've grown to 4–8 inches. In 2024, more than 800 catfish were raised as part of a cooperative nursery program with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Shanksville-Stonycreek FFA advisor Britton Stutzman wanted to join the program after seeing several other local schools get involved. This is her chapter's fifth year of raising channel catfish in three 500-gallon tanks set up in the school's greenhouse. Pool heaters keep the water temperature at about 80 degrees Fahrenheit, aerators help improve water quality and a dechlorinator purchased with a grant provides the fresh, non-chlorinated water the catfish need to thrive.

Many Shanksville-Stonycreek FFA members have never fished before. By the end of the school year, however, they not only know more about fishing, but also have become experts at raising fish.

"We feed the fish, we do water changes, we test the water and we check nitrates and ammonia levels in the water," Stutzman says. "Students are learning a lot of responsibility and accountability."



Andy Zolla catches catfish from one of the school's tanks so they can be transported to Somerset Lake for release.



FFA members place concrete blocks into fish spawning structures they built in the classroom.



Tori Bowers and Katy Kovacs prepare to place the fish habitat structures that were built in the classroom.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The knowledge students gain about water quality in the fish tanks translates to the world outside the school doors as well.

"They learn about erosion, pollution, runoff and all of the aspects that affect water quality," Stutzman says. "If a water change isn't done, they can see the results firsthand and they're learning how important it is to take care of the environment we have."

Conservation education continues even as students help release the fish into Somerset Lake. "The day the fish leave, the Fish and Boat Commission plans a lake instruction day where they can go in kayaks and canoes, learn about boat safety and participate in some fishing activities," Stutzman says.

On this day, students are also able to help the Fish and Boat Commission place habitats that they built during the school year in the Quemahoning Reservoir. These habitats include submerged structures where small fish can hide and turtle basking platforms, according to Don Anderson, a district commissioner with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, who helps the Shanksville-Stonycreek FFA Chapter with its nursery program.

"My hope is that a number of students will go on to pursue a career path in conservation," Anderson says. "Or if they aren't going to work in conservation as a career, maybe they will do conservation work as a volunteer and take an interest in what goes on in their community."