

A Spring Runs Through It

Mike Rahe, Jacksonville, Illinois

Trout and Walleye Production in Freshwater Springs in Illinois

Coordinator: Michael Rahe

Location: Jacksonville, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$4,834

Grant Year: 1998

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Mike Rahe created two spring-fed ponds for fishing, which he offers as an added attraction with his fee-hunting business on 550 acres. Inspired by his trout fishing trips in Wyoming, Rahe decided to bring the same experience to central Illinois.

Mike Rahe was fishing with a friend on his pond when he hooked a 10-pound rainbow trout. The powerful fish snapped Rahe's ultra-light, 4-pound line and made its getaway while Rahe rushed to re-rig his line. The bobber was still attached to the line, giving away every movement by the fleeing fish. Quick on his feet, Rahe's buddy cast his line, hooked the bobber and reeled in the large fish, which was over 2 feet long.

Afternoons like this are one of the bonuses of owning your own freshwater ponds stocked with 200 pounds of fish.

In 1998, Rahe successfully created two productive spring-fed ponds, thanks to a SARE producer grant. However, his goal was not to sell the fish for commercial purposes; instead, he uses the ponds in conjunction with his fee-hunting business on Springview Acres—Rahe's 550-acre owned and leased hunting spread near Jacksonville, Illinois.

Or, to put it in fishing terms, he uses the ponds as a lure.

"It gives my customers a unique experience," says Rahe, who also works for the Bureau of Land and Water Resources in the Illinois Department of Agriculture. "My clients can come and trout fish when they're not busy hunting."



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Rahe has opened up his farm to fee hunters for the past 15 years, one of the first in his area to do so. Today, he says, about 20,000 people come to Illinois from out-of-state every year to bow hunt; and an additional 3,000 to 5,000 come to gun hunt. Pike County, where Rahe's land is located, is one of the top counties in the nation for trophy white-tail bucks.

But Rahe wanted to offer more than hunting to those who stay in his two cabins. Inspired by his trout fishing trips in Wyoming, Rahe decided he could bring that same experience to central Illinois. So he stocked the ponds in 1999 with rainbow trout and largemouth bass.

One pond is directly fed by the spring that flows year-round from the base of a hill, while the second pond is directly downstream from it, closer to the creek that cuts across his property.

For good reason, these ponds are relatively small—about 1/10th of an acre. Rahe stocks the uppermost pond with rainbow trout, a coldwater fish. If he made the pond too big, the water would get too hot in the summertime and the trout would not survive.

According to Rahe, the spring water feeding the ponds remains 55 F all year round; as a result, the water in the ponds never rises above 70 F, even on 100-degree days at the peak of summer.

In addition, the two ponds are surrounded by forestry cover, so minimal sediment and runoff gets into the water. The ponds are essentially pure spring water.

Rahe originally stocked the lower pond with walleye and then smallmouth bass, but neither would eat the fish food. So he finally converted the pond to largemouth bass and bluegill. He restocks the ponds about every two years.

One problem Rahe has run into is predation by herons and raccoons. The raccoon problem is not too bad, he says, and he obtains a permit in the fall to trap them. However, herons are a protected species, so there isn't much he can do about the two or three birds that come by every day to feed on his fish.

Rahe dug out the edges of the ponds, making it more difficult for the herons to find shallow water in which to stand, but they continue to be somewhat of a problem. He lost about one-third of the fish his first year.

Another ongoing battle is with vegetation, such as moss and coontail. He controls them with rakes and a little bit of copper sulfate.

Rahe stocks the pond with relatively large fish, about three-quarters of a pound, even though larger fish are more expensive. He wanted visitors to be able to start catching them right away, so he made sure the fish were already eating size.

Rahe does not charge anyone for the fishing. It comes as a part of his hunting package. He is now looking to build a third and larger pond, which will be about 1¼ acres, but not spring-fed. The bass and bluegill from the second pond will be used to stock the new pond. He then plans to stock catfish in the second pond to provide additional recreational and eating opportunities.

By Jason Peterson