Trout researchers share info

About 200 trout farmers close out their convention Friday

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TWINFALLS—The expensive feed trout farmers give their fish may not be the best thing for them, according to a trout researcher.

Robert Smith, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Tunison Research Laboratory in Hagerman, spoke to about 200 trout farmers Friday during the last day of the U.S. Trout Farmers Association convention in Twin Falls.

Feed is probably the single biggest expense on a fish farm, he said. But research he has "stumbled on" seems to indicate fish will grow better eating a mixture of expensive trout feed and cheap clay.

Smith said he did a lot of "soul searching" before telling trout farmers about this research. "I wondered if anybody would believe me. How can I tell you if you put mud in fish feed, fish will grow better?"

At first he didn't believe it himself. He said he was so sure it wouldn't work, he left the clay he had planned to test sitting under his desk for six months.

When he finally got around to testing it, he found fish did grow bigger. When he repeated the test under a variety of different conditions it happened again. Now, he said, "we've brought up enough problems to keep us busy for 10 years trying to find out why."

What happened is that trout grew bigger when fed with clay and they also needed less feed to do it. The more clay the better, to. Researchers tried mixtures of feed with 2 percent, 5 percent and 10 percent clay. The 10 percent mixture gave the best results. In the most successful tests, fish grew about 14 percent larger on 20 percent less feed than fish fed with plain feed.

This is not an entirely new idea, Smith said. It has worked on poultry, but always in small amounts. "So far, we're the only ones with the stupid audacity to feed it at 10 percent," Smith said.

He doesn't know why clay helps trout grow. At the end of his speech he said, "I hope there are no questions because I don't have any answers."

Which wasn't the case. In answer to one question, Smith said a couple of theories have been advanced to explain the improved weight gain clay seems to yield. One possibility is that clay slows down the digestive process so food stays in the fish longer, he said. Another theory says clay contains some unknown, but important, nutrient.

Much testing remains to be done, Smith said. For one thing, the clay fish haven't been taste-tested yet. Fish are also being held to see if there are any long-term side effects.

Finally, tests will have to be made to see if clay has the same effect on growth when fed to fish grown outside of the lab, in commercial trout farms.