



Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Wednesday August 11, 2021

10:00 am – 3:00 pm

Jay's Sporting Goods Inc., Clare and Online

Approved

Attendees (In-Person): Frank Krist, Dennis Gulau, Jim Johnson, Bryan Darland, Tod Williams, Randy Terrian, Jim DeClerck, Dave Fielder, Meaghan Gass, Brandon Schroeder, John Moore, John Letts, Michael Veine, Ed Beckley, Mike Kelly, Matt Currie, Jason Gostiaux, Mike Tower, Jeff Jolley, Leo Mrozinski, Dana Serafin, Sam McMurry, Nick Torsky, Blaise Pewinski, Rob Pinskey, Jerry Brown, Les Bloodworth, Ralph Zimmermann.

Attendees (On-line): Randy Claramunt, Fred Sterns, Tom Frontjes, Geneva Langeland, Thomas Heritier, Eric Plant, April Simmons, Bryan Burroughs, Brian Roth, Christian LeSage, David Cozad, Judy Ogden, Andrew Briggs, Donna Wesander, Ed Blissick, Ed Eisch, Gary Whelan, Jim Felgenauer, Ken Pletcher, Laura Ogar, Martha VanAmberg, Seth Herbst, Steve Lenart, Tess Nelkie, Todd Wills, Tom Keerl, Gene Kirvan, Tess Nelkie, Capt. Dan Manyen, Dennis Eade.

Welcome, Introductions and Announcements:

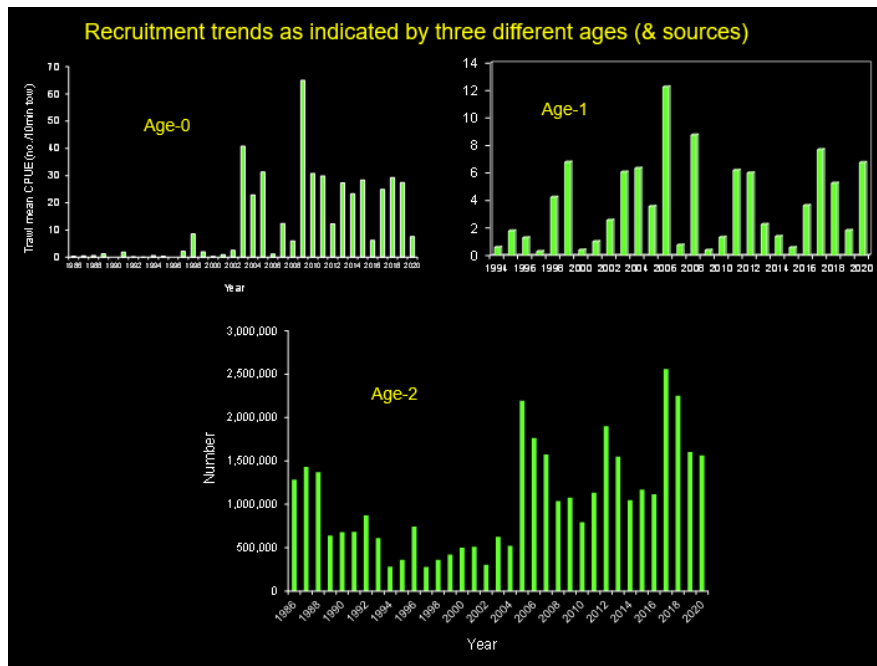
Frank Krist welcomed everyone and thanked the staff at Jay's Sporting Goods for help with the technology and use of the space. Dr. Merckel has undergone heart surgery, his kidneys are not doing well, but he is coming home. Please wait a few weeks to call him. Randy Claramunt thanked Meaghan and Brandon for setting up the virtual zoom meeting.

Status of the Saginaw Bay walleye and yellow perch fisheries (Dr. Dave Fielder, DNR Research Biologist)

For more detailed information, the slide presentations and other information can be viewed at this link, <https://sites.google.com/msu.edu/lhcfac/home/past-meetings/august-2021>.

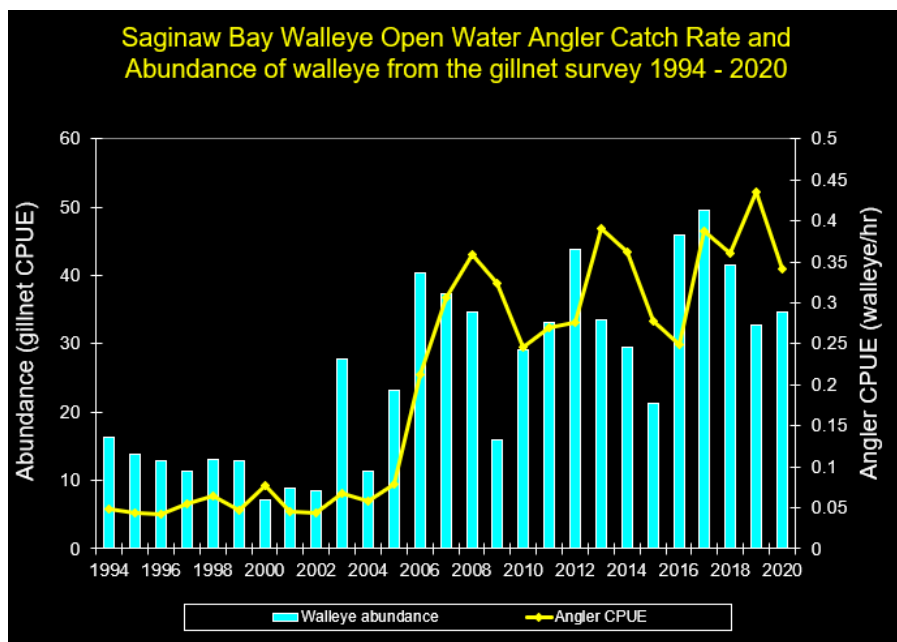
The Saginaw Bay fishery data are drawn from many sources including fish community surveys (gill netting and trawling), walleye jaw tagging, creel surveys, commercial reporting, and computer models.

Walleye Recruitment Trends: Age 0 walleyes are all wild with the 2020 survey showing a lower number. There has been a steady up and down pattern on about a four-year cycle. The results in 2008, 2012 and 2016 were similarly low but the years in between were strong. The main reliable measure of walleye recruitment is the annual mean catch rate of yearling (age 1) walleye caught in the bay with survey nets. Age 0 walleyes are vulnerable to predation during the winter, and many can be lost by predation and other factors. The 2019 yearling year-class of walleye (Age 1) that was surveyed in 2020 is strong. An estimate of age 2 walleye by the SCAA model is about 1.5 million. It is high but it is coming down a small amount, possibly because of the presence of many older walleye in the population. See the Chart below.



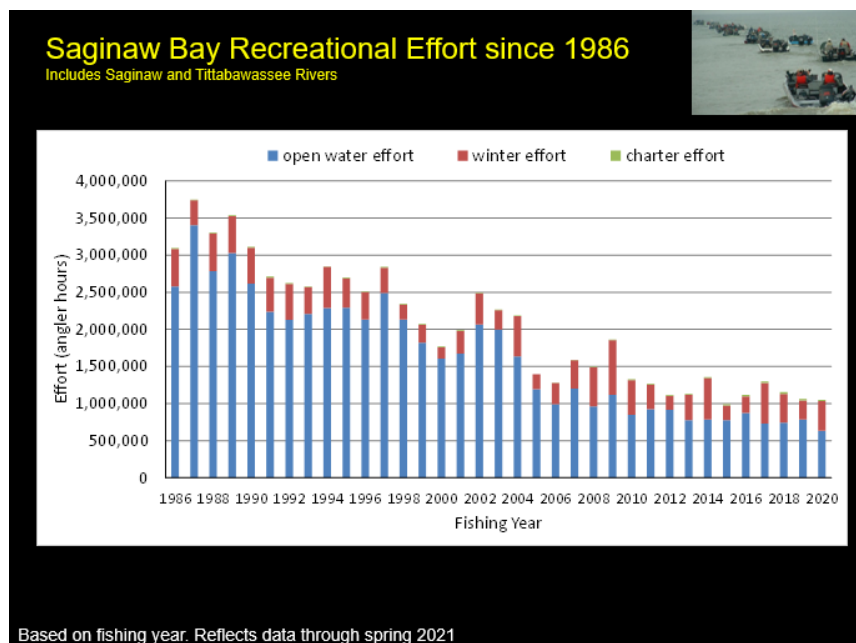
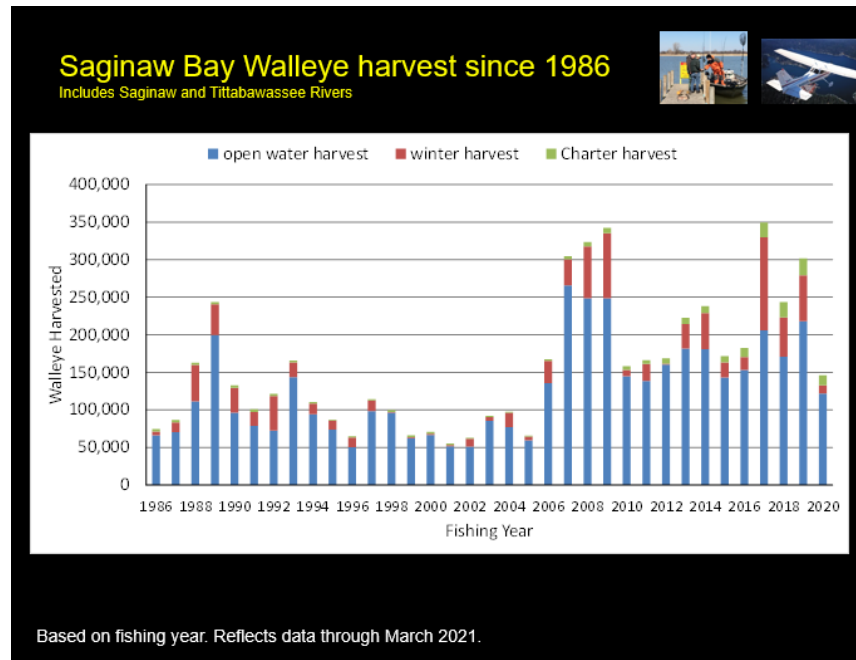
Growth and Conditions: Average length for age 3 walleye is used to measure the growth rate. As the number of walleye increase, the growth rate comes down because of competition for food. The goal is to keep abundance such that the growth rate is at or below the target. During the last several years, the growth rate has been at or slightly below the recovery zone. However, the average length has gone up in 2020 which could mean fewer walleye or more forage for the walleyes to eat.

Trends in Total Walleye Abundance and Angler Catch Rate: Walleye abundance in the 2020 fall gillnet survey was relatively high. The angler catch rate reflected the high abundance of walleye and although the catch rate went down a small amount it was still high as shown in the chart below.



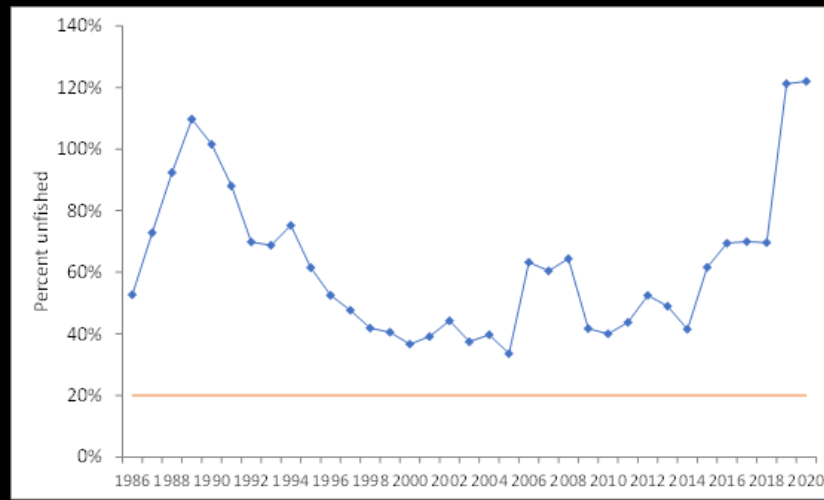
Walleye Harvest and Angler Effort: The 2020 walleye harvest declined and the winter fishery in Saginaw Bay went from a record high in 2017 to one of lowest in several years although somewhat similar to 2015 and 2016. What does this mean for management and years moving forward? It was suggested

that Covid and the boating closure might have impacted the harvest, however, effort was similar to 2019. Weather conditions can also impact the harvest. It was noted that even though there was more effort during the winter last year, the ice conditions were relatively poor, and the anglers often could not venture to the most favorable walleye fishing sites. However, there was a few periods when the Saginaw River had good ice and the catch rates were still poor. Another factor that creates uncertainty is that the creel survey was delayed until May and working restrictions prevented the creel clerks from taking fish samples during the open water months, used to determine the age of the fish caught.



Spawning Stock Biomass is the number of calculated kilograms of mature females in the population. The Chart below shows that the spawning stock biomass is at a record high, and it is way above the target orange line. A spawning stock biomass below the line would not be sustainable. This high level of

Percent of the unfished Spawning Stock Biomass of Saginaw Bay walleyes 1986 – 2020



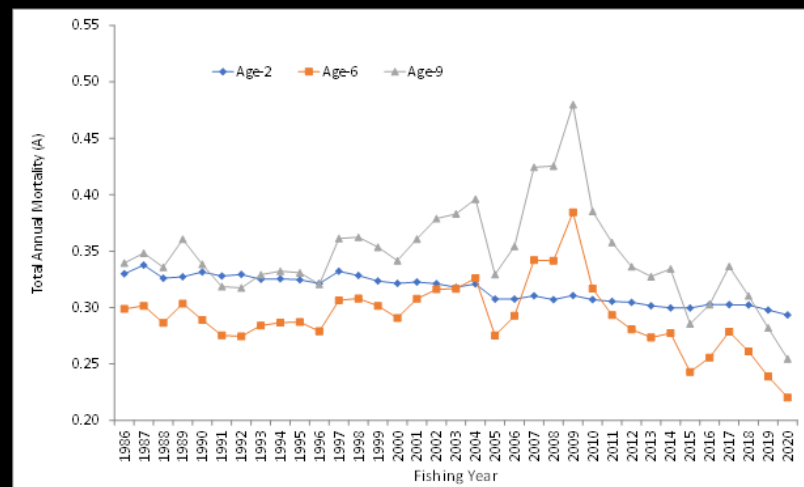
Reflects data through March 2021

adult females is the result of many successful years of reproduction, and this shows that the walleye population is highly sustainable.

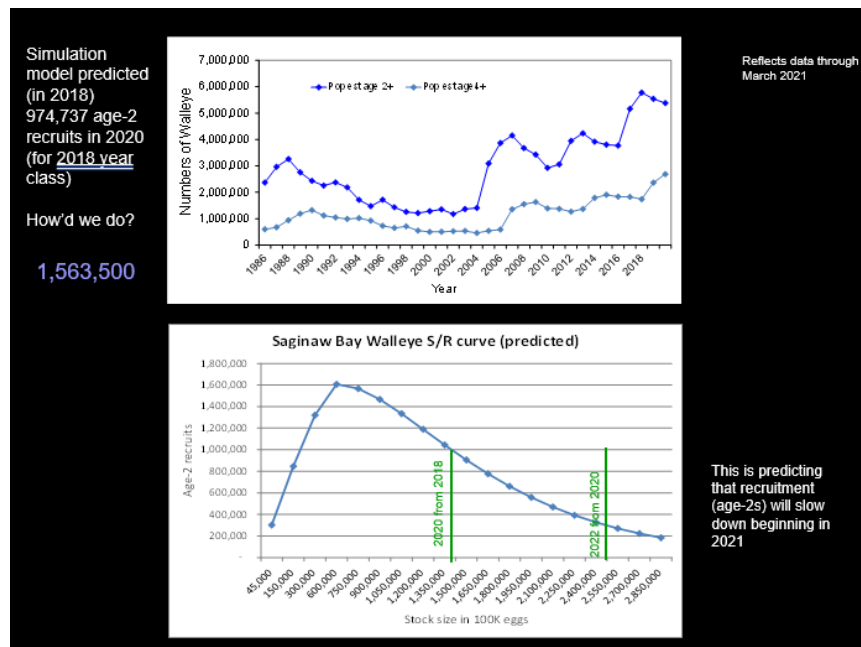
Trends in Walleye Mortality: The goal of liberalizing the walleye regulations was to bring the number of walleyes down to better balance the population with the hope of increasing survival of the juvenile yellow perch by reducing walleye predation on the yellow perch. It was anticipated with liberalized walleye regulations the walleye mortality rate would increase but it actually came down as shown below.

Trends in Total Annual Mortality (A) of Saginaw Bay Walleyes as indicated by five age groups

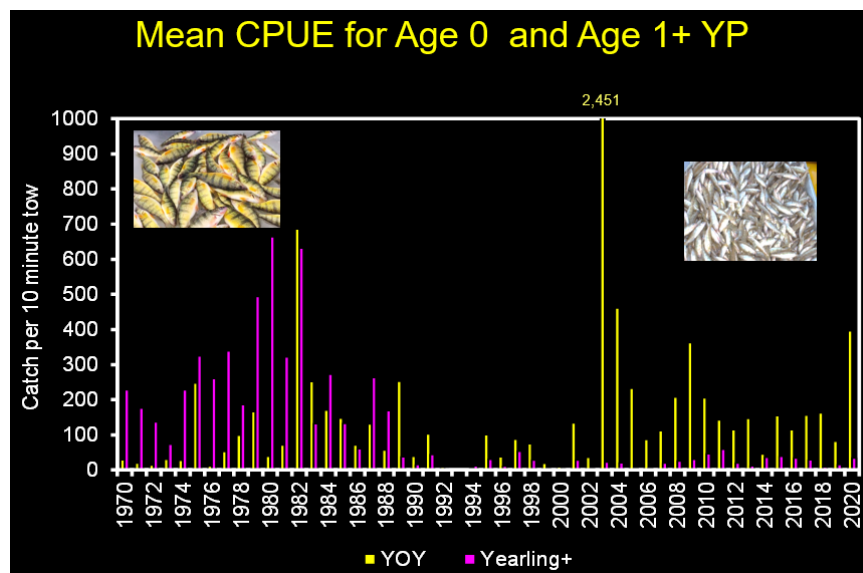
Reflects data through March 2021



Stock Recruitment Curve: The top chart below shows that both the number of the 2-year-old and older walleye are at relatively high levels. The 4-year-old and older fish have increased some. The Stock Recruitment Curve below indicates as the spawning stock (expressed as the number of eggs produced each year) moves to the right on the curve there are more adults but actually fewer young walleye (recruits) being produced. As the number of older fish increases, there are fewer young fish produced because of density issues like predation by the older walleye on the juveniles. The simulation model in 2018 predicted that there would be 974,737 age 2 walleye in 2020. This was low since the estimate is actually 1,562,500. Because of the density issue mentioned above it is predicted that the recruitment of age 2 fish will actually slow down beginning in 2021.

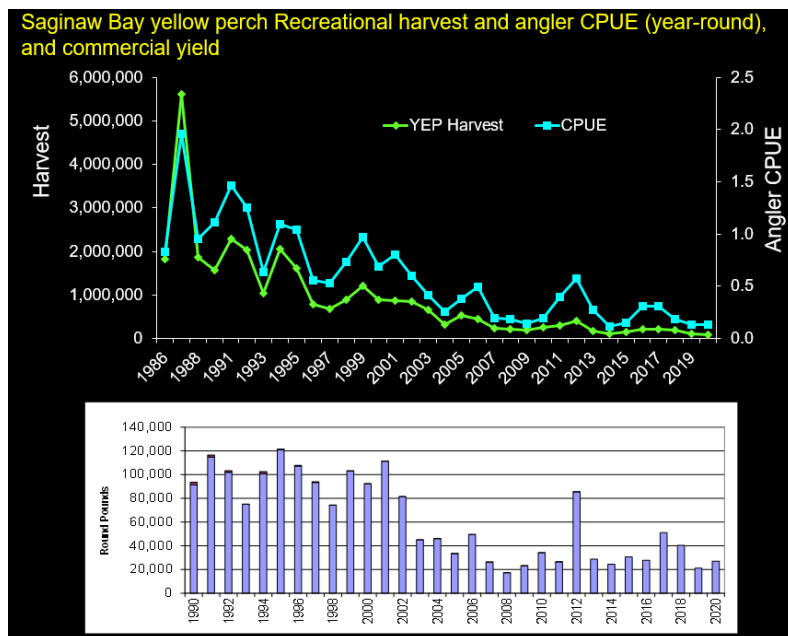


Yellow Perch Abundance: The yellow bars in the Chart below show the amount of the Age 0 (young the year) yellow perch fingerlings caught in the annual trawl survey each year. The number taken in 2020 was very high compared to the previous several years, however, Age 0 yellow perch are not a good



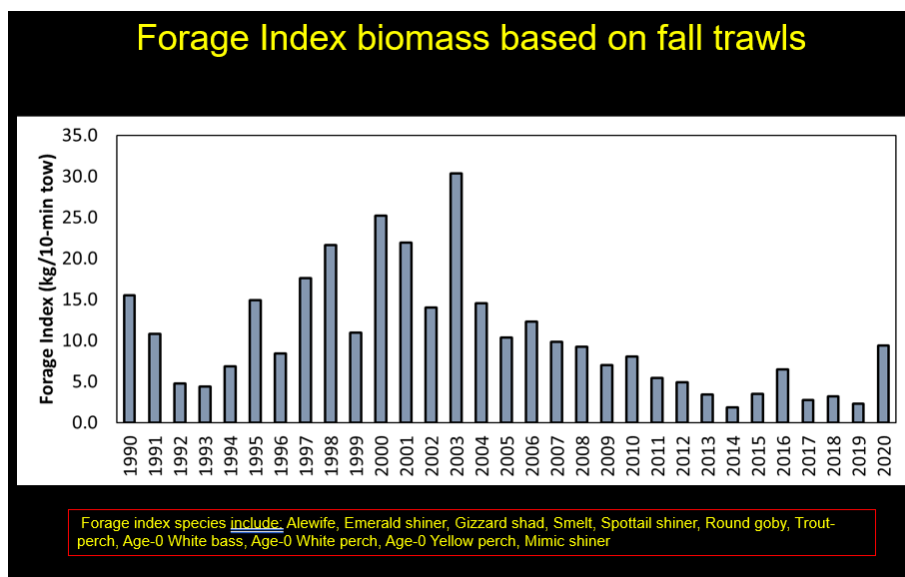
indicator of year class strength because few have been surviving to the following year. This poor survival has been caused by predation from walleye and other species along with possibly other factors. The purple bars on the Chart represent the Age-1 yellow perch and older caught in the survey. As shown in the chart, during 2020 the number of Age 1 yellow perch remains very low.

Yellow Perch Harvest: The upper graph in the Chart below shows that both the yellow perch harvest and the catch rate by anglers remained very low in 2020. In addition, the bar graph on the bottom of

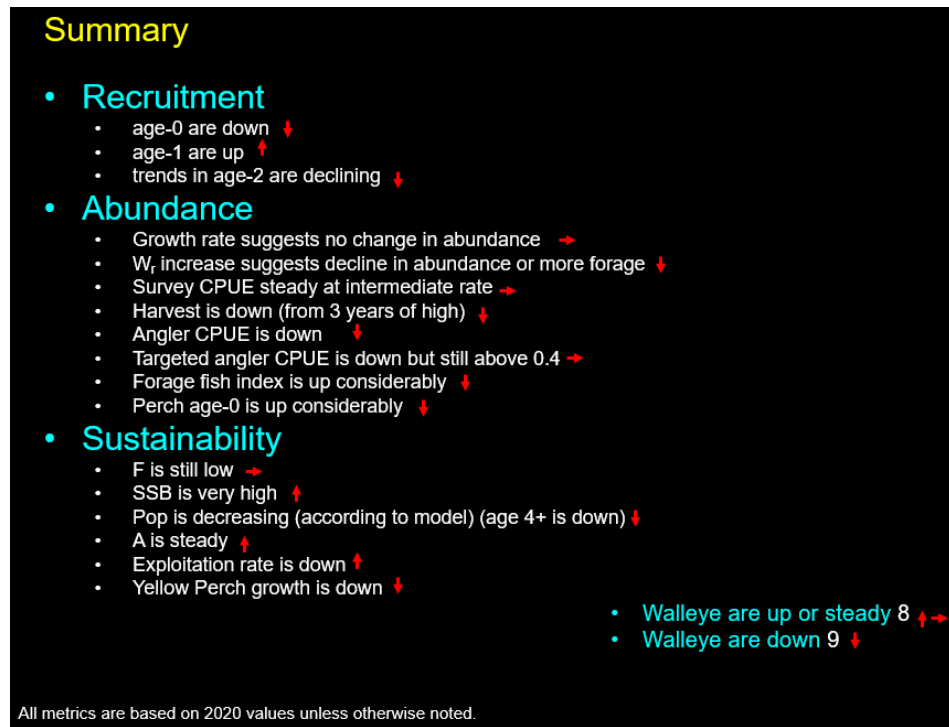


the Chart shows that the commercial yield remained low.

Forage fish index: There was concern the last few years with the low number of forage fish in the survey but in the Chart below there was a significant increase. The bulk of the prey consisted of Age-0 white perch at 70% while Age-0 yellow perch was 15% of the catch.



Walleye Movement: Is it difficult to measure the abundance of walleye in Saginaw Bay when many leave the bay each year? Walleye movement has been studied by both manual and acoustic tags and so far, the data have shown that about 50% of the walleye leave the bay and travel both to the north and south. The 5-year study with the acoustic tags showed that the same fish migrated with similar patterns each year so unless there are changes, the movement of the fish is accounted for with the model.



Summary: The main objective established in 2015 was to liberalize walleye harvest regulations so the walleye number would be reduced enough to lower the predation on yellow perch and allow the yellow perch to recover to higher levels. So far there is little evidence that walleye abundance has been lowered enough to have much impact. The Chart above lists the various factors used to measure the abundance of walleyes in Saginaw Bay. A down arrow indicates that walleye abundance might be decreasing while the up arrow indicates that the walleye abundance might be increasing. An arrow pointing to the right indicates that the abundance is steady. Overall, 8 metrics are indicating the abundance is either up or steady while 9 metrics are pointing to walleye abundance declining.

There is much uncertainty with the data because of complications from Covid, the dam failures, sporadic fishing success and other factors. Not only did angler habits change but Creel Clerks were restricted from handling anglers fish for much of the year so only a few aging samples were obtained. This creates uncertainty of the age structure of the population.

Questions and Comments

Why did perch decline back in the 1980s?

Dave Fielder: The impact of the Clean Water Act reduced the nutrients and ultimately the productivity of the water declined resulting in less food and fewer perch especially in Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. With the nutrient input from the Saginaw River the loss of nutrients are probably less in Saginaw Bay. The Zebra and especially the Quagga mussels have also contributed to food web changes.

Dana Serafin: mentioned that he is seeing much fewer walleyes in his nets.

Dave F: Today's estimates of the walleyes killed as by-catch by commercial fisheries is based on the 2012 study conducted by MSU. Dana was a participant in the study, however, conditions could be different today and there is interest in repeating the study.

Capt Dan Manyen: Conditions are the same as before. Hot ponds are gone, and the dam breaking may have caused impacts. Can you tell us what's happening?

Dave F: Our data do not catch today's changes. The first we can determine a change is when the fall surveys are completed, and the creel data are available at the end of the season. There is much uncertainty this year. The dams breaking likely came too late to impact the spring spawn, but we cannot be sure. It appeared that the spawning habitat in the river was not seriously impacted.

Ken Pletcher: Cheboygan catch rate for migrating walleye is abysmal this year.

Ed Beckley: indicated that the walleye fishing out of Au Gres has been poor all spring and through the summer. Anglers are having to go north and south to catch walleyes. There have been lots of commercial nets off of Au Gres this year.

Randy Terrian: mentioned that his extensive monitoring of the Au Sable River this year indicated that the walleye migration was extremely low compared to other years.

Status of the Saginaw Bay Walleye and Yellow Perch Management Plan revision; report on the findings of the Saginaw Bay Walleye and Yellow Perch Workgroup, and the online survey (Dr Jeff Jolley, DNR Southern Lake Huron Unit Manager and Jason Gostiaux, DNR Fishery Biologist)

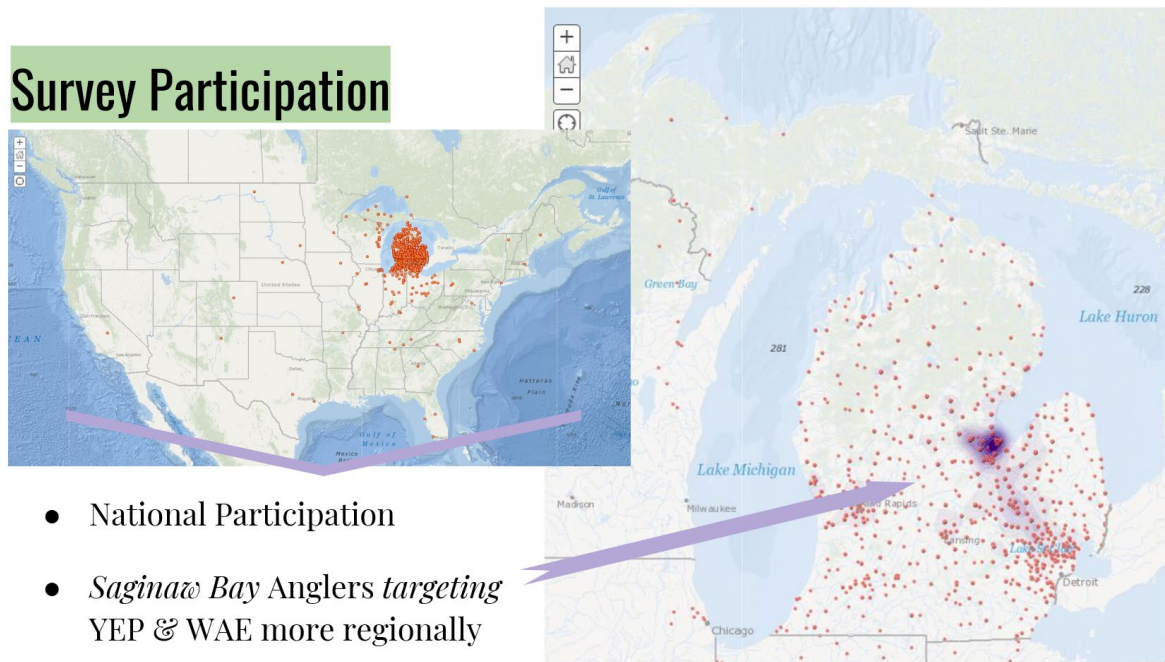
The purpose of the Saginaw Bay Walleye and Yellow Perch Workgroup was to develop an angler driven vision and the representatives consisted of shore and offshore anglers, business representatives and others. Jeff Jolley, Jason Gostiaux, Addie Dutton, and Dave Fielder were involved with input from Randy Claramunt. Meaghan Gass from Michigan Sea Grant was very helpful and assisted facilitating the four online meetings.

There is still no Saginaw Bay Plan and Vision completed but much work has been done. The Working Group is still looking at data and this meeting will be very helpful. At the Workgroup meetings the DNR and participants compared ideas and came up with a list of values that should be part of the fishery:

1. Resilient sustainable fishery that can withstand change
2. High quality fishery
3. Yellow perch and walleye are highly valued but so are the many other species that provide a diverse fishery
4. Species restoration like establishing cisco again
5. Improving fish habitat
6. Water quality improvement
7. Variety of fishing opportunities for shore and boat anglers

The Group was concerned about taking risks and wanted to base decision making on the best data available. There especially was much concern and frustration about the poor yellow perch fishery. Yellow perch has always been very important to the area and remains a very popular species. There is strong interest in bringing that fishery back to high levels.

The Workgroup wanted to obtain additional input from the public, so an online survey was developed. The survey ran for a little over a month this past spring and 2,103 persons participated from not only Michigan but from around the country, see map above. The respondents had a diverse background



including those that fished in Saginaw Bay to those that were only interested in the continued status of the fishery. The results are preliminary since the Workgroup has not spent much time reviewing the results. A summary of the results is below.

Increasing walleye harvest: It was asked if the online survey respondents support increasing walleye harvest to help reduce predation on yellow perch. About half of the participants supported increasing walleye harvest while the other half did not want to make changes.

Open the Saginaw River the entire year: In another question the majority indicated that they felt the walleye season in the Saginaw River should not be open during the current spawning closure. A smaller number favored catch and release and a second smaller group favored opening the river the entire year. The last group that favored opening the walleye fishery the entire year was asked if they wanted more strict regulations during the special open season and the majority favored being more conservative during a newly opened spring fishery.

Complex regulations: About half the results favored more complex regulations to deal with improving the fishery while approximately the other half preferred simple regulations.

How often should regulations be changed if needed: The vast majority supported changing the regulation every one or two years so there is significant support for changing regulations often.

Bag Limits: There was a wide range of suggested bag limits with the most support for 5, 6 and 8 fish but even some respondents supported 10 walleye per day.

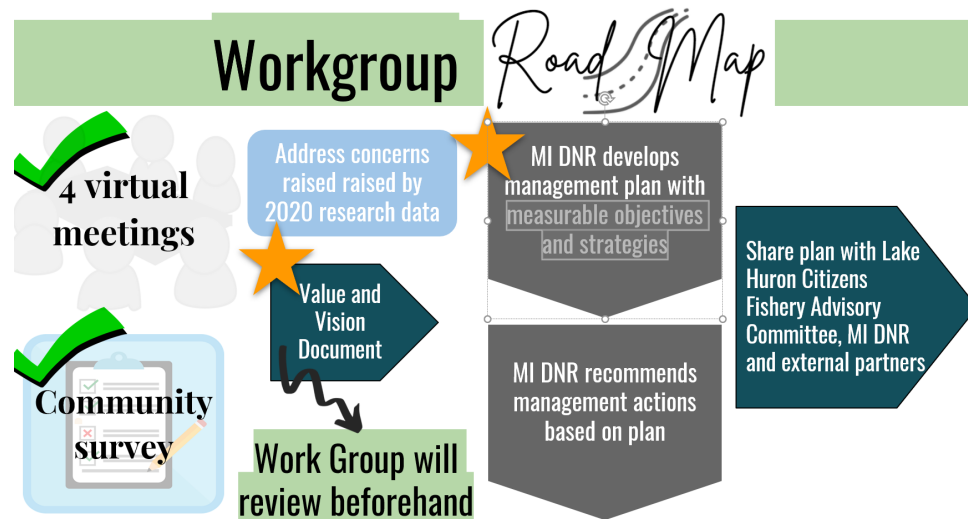
Manage for more fish or bigger fish: The vast majority supported having a consistent chance to bring home a limit, however there were a lesser number of respondents that would like to have a chance to catch a trophy fish even if fewer were caught.

What species of fish were pursued in the last 12 months? Many species are popular, but walleye is sought the most with yellow perch and other panfish are second, and bass third. At least 8 other species are pursued but in much smaller amounts.

What species of fish is targeted most often? Walleye are pursued most often by far.

What is the main reason for going fishing? There were many choices like enjoying being out of doors but the most important reason by far was to bring fish home to eat.

Outcome of the Workgroup: The Workgroup will be using the online survey along with the scientific data and other information to assist in developing a “value and vision” document that will be shared



with the Fisheries Division staff to develop a Management Plan for Saginaw Bay with measurable objectives and strategies. The Plan will then be shared with the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee. See the Workbook-Playbook above.

Questions and Comments:

Randy Claramunt: Science, biological data, stakeholders, and our discussions today will help put the pieces of the puzzle together. This will assist in determining how much risk should be put on the fishery to achieve the goals by liberalizing the regulations versus being more conservative.

Laura Ogar: Laura Ogar: Laura said she attends these meetings for personal reasons as she fishes in the Saginaw Bay but also professional reasons as she is the Environmental Affairs and Community Development Director for Bay County. She noted that there are many different people who aren't necessarily fishermen who regularly mention how significant and very valuable yellow perch are, such as the Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and restaurants. A lot of people who don't fish or who used to fish and don't anymore for various reasons still want the opportunity to have local perch to purchase at a market or restaurant. People from not only Saginaw Bay from all over the state come to the area for an opportunity to catch yellow perch. The fishing experience for yellow perch is more of a family event or activity and people have lots of memories and a personal connection to the species so reduction of yellow perch is concerning. From my experience, the yellow perch are important to much larger diverse groups of people than what was represented in the survey.

Frank: How would you envision changing the Management Plan to influence the yellow perch population?

Jeff: Increasing yellow perch abundance is one objective but there are others to balance such as walleye catch rates. We want to continue to monitor measurable parameters and currently there are a lot of unknowns with the reports of the walleye harvest going down this year. We have done a lot of different approaches but perhaps there is nothing more management wise that we can do. I am looking forward to input from the participants today.

Jerry Brown: Yellow perch were and still are extremely important and in the past, there were charter businesses that pursued only yellow perch that brought families out to fish and acquainted kids to fishing. Youths are not buying as many licenses today. Besides the large number of walleyes in the bay eating the yellow perch, cormorants are also impacting the fishery.

Randy Terrian: Some of the pieces of the original plan have not been fully implemented such as establishing a cisco population to provide additional prey for the walleyes and managing the cormorant population. Possibly, if these two factors can be accomplished there is a chance to see improvement of the yellow perch population.

Dave Fielder: Yellow perch is the most sought fish in the state. Michigan is not a trout and salmon state. We have made bold moves to improve the yellow perch fishery in Saginaw Bay. In the short run, walleye bag limits were increased, yellow perch bag limits were reduced, and a commercial yellow perch fishing license was relocated out of the bay. These changes have not improved the yellow perch fishery. In the long run, cormorant management may help but alone it is probably not enough. I am hopeful that cisco restoration may be important, however that is a long-term item. There are only so many options available, but I am open to suggestions.

Jim Johnson: The increased forage fish population could be the cause of the walleye's better growth and with more forage available that could be causing the fish to be more difficult to catch. That was noted in the past because when alewives were very plentiful in the bay it was much more difficult to catch a walleye. There were reports of lots of juvenile shad last summer and during the winter the shad, which are not cold tolerant, were dying and very vulnerable to walleyes and this may have contributed to the poor walleye catch rate.

Comment: We are not seeing much bait in the stomachs of walleyes in the Au Gres Area.

Frank: Is it possible the forage fish are concentrated in specific parts of the Bay resulting in erratic results?

Dave Fielder: It is unlikely that the fish are mostly in isolated locations, but I do not know. We should be able to have a much better understanding of the fishery in another year.

Comment: Yellow perch made Au Gres famous. When the yellow perch were plentiful you could always see kids in fishing boats but now with the current fishery, kids are not very interested.

Ken Pletcher: It seems like we need to decide which species is more important at this point. When the walleye population is very high the yellow perch abundance remains low. There is reluctance to reduce the walleye population enough to improve the yellow perch fishery.

Dave F: That is a good point and that is what we are confronted with.

Comment: We go to different ports to have walleye tournaments and a visit to Escanaba showed the walleyes to be significantly larger for a certain length compared to Saginaw Bay. There seems to be lots of small fish in Saginaw Bay.

Dave F: There are many smaller walleyes in the Bay but most of them are young fish. The growth rate of walleye in the bay is faster than the state average. The bay could be managed for trophy fish, but you can see from the survey that 2 to 1 more anglers want to have high catch rates instead of fewer but larger fish. Also, the regulations needed to manage for trophy fish are not popular with many anglers. In an area the size of Saginaw Bay it is generally not practicable to manage for a trophy fishery since such a large number of anglers utilize the fishery. Trophy management often works better in much smaller bodies of water.

Brain Burroughs: The presentations are well done and I appreciate the large amount of data. What stands out is the exploitation rate is low and the spawning stock biomass is high. The fishery is well to the right of the peak on the Stock Recruitment Curve and is trending even more to the right. Normally near the peak is ideal. These solid parameters indicate that it might be time to liberalize the fishery a little more and make some river anglers happy. This would provide a better chance of having the newly hatched yellow perch survive the first year so more can grow to large sizes. There seems to be little risk moving forward with this opportunity.

Dave F: We are about a year behind on the data and there is uncertainty because the fall and winter fisheries were down along with many reports of poor fishing in the spring in summer. In addition, there is concern about the survival of the walleye fry after the dam failures. The fishery might be in excellent condition, but more time is needed to verify that, and we need to make a decision now whether to change regulations for 2022.

Bryan Burroughs: I appreciate your comment, however, I want to point out that only risks to the walleye population are being considered. This approach does not consider the risks that prevent improvements in survival of yellow perch.

Dave F: You are correct that walleyes are being favored and to favor yellow perch more the current regulations should be left in place. We will be discussing that and other possible options this afternoon.

Will there be any changes to the walleye and yellow perch regulations in Saginaw Bay for 2022? (Jeff Jolley, Jason Gostiaux, Dave Fielder, and Randy Claramunt).

Jeff: I will begin with a summary. There is mixed information including some indication that the walleye may be less abundant. In addition, there is evidence that the regulations are not working as planned to increase yellow perch. I am here to listen, but I will mention two possible themes.

- a) **Theme 1:** The goal has been to lower the walleye population so continue the current regulations for another year and follow the progress. This would provide more data and hopefully reduce the uncertainty.
- b) **Theme 2:** Walleye are too important to gamble with and increasing yellow perch is not materializing so reduce the current liberalized regulations until the management plan is completed and more data are available.

We will start the discussion and determine which direction to go. Two questions will be asked:

- Make a change or not?
- If yes, what is that change?

Questions and Comments:

Frank: Since there is some risk at maintaining the bag limit of walleye at 8 fish, is it known how much the risk would be reduced if the bag limit is reduced to 7, 6 or even 5 fish? How many fish would be saved by lowering the bag limit?

Dave F: Going from 8 to 7 probably would not have much impact but reducing the bag limit to 6 fish would probably have a measurable impact but it would not be large. I have not calculated how many walleye would be saved by lowering the bag limit various amounts but it could be done.

Jim Felgenauer: Chair of Lake Erie Citizens Advisory Committee. I am speaking for myself. Regulation changes have little impact. When the size limit is reduced to 13 inches many anglers will begin culling the small fish from the live well once the limit is reached. Increasing the bag limit does not increase harvest much because anglers can only eat a limited amount of fish and stay legal with their possession limit. Overall, adjustments to the creel limit have very limited impact on harvest.

Dave F: Bag limits and minimum size limits can have some impact but often the outcome is more social than biological. There is some uncertainty, but we have to decide today.

Dana Serafin: It was estimated that there were 6 million walleyes in the bay and they were not caught by hook and line so where did they go? I am not catching them. I have been doing this 30 years and the walleye are gone.

Dave F: The difficulty in catching the walleyes could be due to several factors including impacts from Covid and a different distribution of the fish in the bay. I do not have the answer at this time.

Jason Gostiaux: I managed the DNR tag return database for two years and in 2020 there was a group of walleyes that left the bay and migrated to the north. This year I am not seeing many fish leave the bay and possibly it is due to the winds that may be keeping the bay cooler than normal.

Dana Serafin: The walleyes ate the forage fish, and the walleyes are no longer there. The bay cannot support 6 million walleyes.

Dave F: Historically, the bay did support that many walleyes and the current growth rates of the walleye being above the state average shows that the walleye have enough food.

Greg Gumbrecht. This year the fishing out of Linwood has been good but it just might take a little longer to catch a limit. We are catching many larger fish in the 3-to-4-pound range. The regulations do make a difference because the 30 or so charter boats fishing out of Linwood are keeping every fish over 13 inches and coming in as soon as they reach their limit. They are efficient since they run 12 to 16 rods and put 40 or more fish in the box. There is bait in the stomachs and the fish are regularly spitting up 2 inch fish. The water recently has warmed to 75 degrees top to bottom. Once the water temperature increased above 72 degrees the fishing slowed. One sad point is that many anglers measure the success of a trip by catching their bag limit. Anglers will often complain even when they have a cooler of fish but did not catch their legal limit. Anglers are getting spoiled and reducing the bag limit is not bad since there is still excellent fishing available.

Jim De Clerk: We put this plan together to reduce the walleye population and increase the yellow perch population. I am not a believer in changing things based on a knee jerk reaction. If we change nothing, we won't run out of walleye, and they are even getting bigger. There are still a lot of questions but not changing regulations for one year will not hurt anything, however, we might learn more and actually have a positive impact on the yellow perch. I vote not to change the regulations for another year.

Eric Plant: Greg was right in saying fish are coughing up whatever forage they have been eating in live wells. I have seen large amounts of bait on the graph on trips whether in inner bay and even up off Tawas. On flat calm days I have even seen large schools of minnows on the surface. The forage is still there. Anglers are getting spoiled. Catching limits are good but are not necessary to have a great trip.

Jason Gostiaux: Anglers have been getting accustomed to the very high world class walleye catch rates and when they decline a little and fishing is still excellent, anglers become concerned with what is just a normal fluctuation. Another item is as Dave mentioned, we are always about a year behind in data. The survey information collected this year will be presented next August at our meeting. We still do not know if the flood impacted survival of the juvenile walleye. The upcoming surveys in the bay this fall will provide data to answer that question.

Fred Sterns: Stick with the current plan and gather more data.

Ed Beckley: I am seeing lower catch rates, however, effort was up because Covid brought out more anglers. As a business owner this is a bumper year. If the limit goes back to 5, anglers will come into the shop more but as a fisherman, keep the bag limit at 8.

John Moore: I have been marking lots of large hooks on the fish finder throughout the water column and I was wondering what species they might be.

Dave F: It is very difficult to say since the marks could be a variety of species.

Question: From Sanford, there have been big plants of walleye, how many came down to Saginaw Bay? Are there any that remained upstream?

Jeff Jolley: You are right that many walleyes were stocked upstream. We surveyed the damage and much of the walleye habitat in the ponds was destroyed but there are tailwater areas that were relatively not impacted and contain many large walleyes. Further downstream there are pockets in the river where some walleyes probably are making new homes.

Tom Heritier: Takes a long time for change to show definitive result. Suggest we give it more time to get more information. Some changes are like a once in a lifetime event. We need more data.

Kenneth Pletcher: Leave the regulations the same. We have thoughts, but we need to let it play out longer.

Frank: Why don't we do more for shore anglers? If there are risks, reduce the bag limit and increase the minimum size limit. One of the biggest complaints that I receive is why is there not more opportunity in the Great Lakes for shore anglers. There are many people who live around Saginaw Bay and many are stuck in their homes until spring. Opening the river would allow more people to get outdoors and use the fishery. Would opening the river slaughter the fish? There is not spawning habitat in the lower river and how is that much different than boat anglers fishing just off the mouth of the river?

Jim Johnson: Urban fishing is very important to me. When I was working, the DNR established a fishing park on Belle Isle and ever since it has been extremely popular with shore anglers including families. People with no boats have been enjoying the fishery. There are the same opportunities in Bay City and Saginaw. There are parks and boat lunches along the river for small boats and shore anglers. Not enough but enough to provide much more opportunity. We brought the fish to the population, now we need to bring the fishery to everyone that likes to fish. Opening the river is not the same as opening the

spawning ground. The walleyes are just moving through the lower river and spawn upstream in the tributaries.

Ed Beckley: If only the Saginaw River is opened, anglers from the other streams will complain that they have been left out. Why not significantly reduce the bag limit and increase the minimum size limit everywhere, including the bay and open all the tributaries flowing into the bay?

Blaise Pewinski: I agree and disagree with the opening and closing of some rivers. All the rivers should be treated the same. We cannot afford to take away the spawners by opening the river. The bay is thriving and right now there are lots of walleye in the outer bay where the water is a little cooler.

Mike Kelly. Regarding the river fishery, keep in mind that the river is only closed for 45 days. It is not closed for months at a time. We fish the river a lot. There are walleyes in that river all year long. Last week the river was 82 degrees and walleye were being caught. In addition, there are many other species that can be caught in the river. Once it is opened it would be very difficult to close it again if needed.

Frank: There were several boat launches and some parks along the lower Saginaw River and asked if shore anglers and small boat users can use these sites.

Jim De Clerk: Jim indicated that there were opportunities for the shore and small boat anglers, but he favored not changing the regulations at this time since it would make it more difficult to evaluate the results.

Frank: When the walleye/yellow perch project began in 2015 the Committee and DNR committed to reviewing the data each year and would make changes if needed. I was not suggesting increasing the overall risks but possibly reduce the bay bag limit in both the bay and river to provide room for added harvest in the river. There has been concern expressed that once the river is opened then it would be impossible to close it again if a problem results. I do not believe that is the case because the Committee working with the DNR, and Michigan Sea Grant were able to review the data and build a solid message that was taken to the public and there was strong support for eliminating brown trout stocking and most Chinook Salmon stocking in Lake Huron. If over harvest was occurring in the river, very strong opposition would likely develop. This is why it is critical that if the lower section of the river is opened, there is a creel survey during that period to documents the harvest.

Mike Veine: There has been much uncertainty expressed with the fishery and I feel we should hold the course until next year. If I was asked a few years ago to open the lower river I would agree, but now I favor not changing the regulations this year and review the data next year.

Eric Plant. Again, one month opening up the river just does not seem like it will do enough to make a dent in the population. The river floods regularly in the spring and limits the ability to fish. There are plenty of shore fishing opportunities for other species on stretches of the river. The number of fish caught by shore anglers comes nowhere near close to what is caught by boat anglers. It would be a surprise if some anglers don't want to open all the other tributaries too. This is a brood stock fishery and not dependent on stocking. There are plenty of fish to be caught year-round minus the 40 days the season is closed. Plenty of opportunities as Mike Kelly pointed out.

Tess Nelkie: Stay the course. We need one more year of data. The river is open for all but 45 days, and as other speakers mentioned, there are other species to catch. I would like to also see how the cisco do in the bay since they have only been stocked for a few years. If the river is opened it will just be hard to close again.

Randy Terrian: Most anglers that I talked to would like to see the bag limit be reduced to 5 walleye and the minimum size limit be raised to 15 inches. This year fishing has been very erratic beginning with the winter fishery and continuing with the spring migration of the walleyes. Opening the lower river in 2019 would have made more sense when fishing was excellent, and many were giving their fish away. I support no changes this year and review the new information as it becomes available.

Dennis Gulau: An urban fishery like Jim mentioned is great, but it is bit off base for what we are discussing. Contrary to what many people think, there are many excellent sites for shore anglers and ramps for small boats along the river, but they are not being utilized. The river produces a fantastic year around fishery with other species including channel catfish, fathead catfish, sheepshead, panfish and bass. The main challenge with the urban fishery is education. I catch walleye in the river the entire season even when the river is 80 degrees. I show anglers how to do it, yet they continue to go out on the bay. The river is cheap to fish, convenient, and greatly underutilized. I do not believe opening the river for 45 days when the weather can be bad, and the river is often unfishable, will bring out more anglers. As I said, education could be a powerful tool to expand the urban fishery.

Comment: I agree that education is very important. There was a college bass tournament in the summer and a lot of the bass were caught in the river. There were 170 teams, and it was great to see limit catches of bass. One of the biggest obstacles to getting more people to try fishing in the river are the posted signs at every fishing site showing public health contaminated fish warnings. Some fish can be eaten by certain members of a household, but other species may be banned completely. When a family sees these restricted fish consumption recommendations that may turn them away from fishing in the river. We need to work on this issue.

Greg Gumbrecht: Veterans Park would be great for urban fishing. There is fantastic year around fishing for many species in the river, but few anglers take advantage of the opportunity. It seems like keeping the river closed during the spring goes against improving the urban fishery, but I could go either way. To reduce the risks, could there be a mid-season check of the data to see how the harvest is going?

Dave F: Some data becomes available throughout the year but unfortunately it takes a substantial amount of time to change the regulations so it is not practical at this time.

Bryan Darland: I also run a bass tournament circuit and we had 36 boats fish the Saginaw River this year and the fishing was fantastic. Many bass were over 5 pounds, and everyone was catching fish. The amount of schooling bait in the river is incredible. You can watch the fish feed on the bait. There seems to be some discussion that the walleye in the bay may becoming stunted, is there any evidence of that? Also, what will the cisco in the bay feed on and will they eat small fish like the cisco in Grand Traverse Bays?

Dave F: The walleyes are growing faster than the state average so they are not stunted. Instead, there are just a lot of young walleyes in the bay. Often regulations used to manage a trophy fishery are not popular with most anglers. The cisco in Saginaw Bay will probably eat insects, plankton, and invertebrates. The cisco stocked in the Saginaw Bay are from northern Lake Huron and they are known to eat these types of food items. The cisco in Grand Traverse Bays appears to be a different strain and genetically may not be the same. Cisco have the potential to create recreational and commercial fisheries along with being food for walleyes and other larger predators.

Dennis Gulau. I want to stress that the Saginaw River is not closed to fishing just because only walleyes are not available for 45 days.

Vote:

Should the angler walleye harvest regulations be changed for 2022?

NO 36

YES 4

If we do change harvest regulation for 2022, what should it be? (of the 4 yeses above)

Bag limit 7 and minimum size limit 13 inches **Vote 0**

Bag limit 6 and minimum size limit 13 inches **Vote 2**

Bag limit 5 and minimum size limit 15 inches **Vote 2**

Other

Are you a member of the LHCFAC?

38 NO

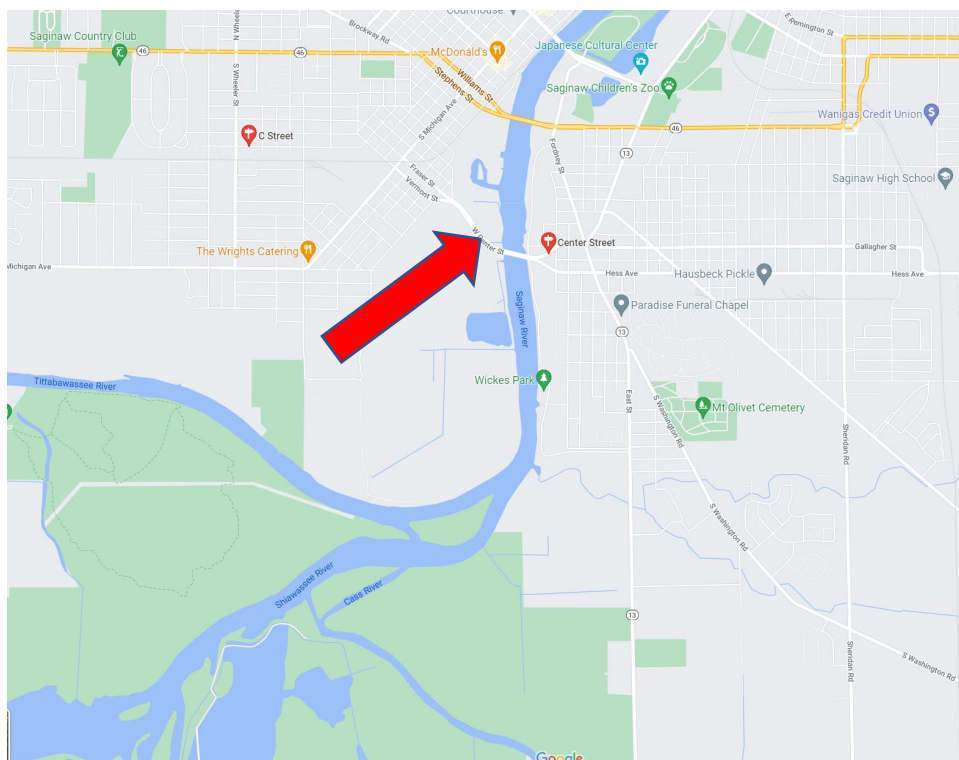
9 YES

A proposed new process and timeline for changing recreational harvest regulations for Saginaw Bay (Jason Gostiaux).



NOTE 3 - Walleye:

- **L. Huron waters of MH-4 (see p. 20) including Saginaw Bay and Saginaw R. upstream to Center St. (Douglas G. Schenk) Bridge: The daily possession limit for walleye is 8 with a 13" minimum size limit.** Any changes will be announced on the DNR website (**Michigan.gov/Fishing**) and in a pre-recorded message at 888-367-7060.



To determine the regulations for Saginaw Bay (MH-4) you must currently go to the **Fishing Guide** and check Table 1 and look for the walleye row. You will notice **Note 3** which is below. The maps below show the up-stream limit at Center Street in Saginaw and the boundaries of MH-4.

Current regulation change process

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
<i>May/June:</i> model updates and survey analysis <i>June/July:</i> meeting between research and managers <i>August:</i> consultation with stakeholders	<i>April 15:</i> proposal to Aquatic Species & Regulatory Affairs Unit due <i>May/June:</i> Multi-Divisional Fisheries Regulation Review Committee <i>June:</i> Chief review <i>July:</i> NRC review and decision <i>Fall/Winter:</i> printing deadline	<i>April 1:</i> Regulation implemented

Currently, changing a fishing regulation, takes 3 years as indicated in the slide above. A more streamlined method of listing the rule in the Fishing Guide has been used many years for the Lake Erie walleye fishery. There is no specific regulation placed in the printed Fishing Guide and instead there is a note to call a phone number or go to the online version of the Fishing Guide which is updated regularly.

The slide below shows the streamlined steps of implementing a proposed regulation a year earlier. If adopted, **Note 3** in the printed Fishing Guide would no longer list the specific rule but instead a phone number to call for the specific rule would be provided along with indicating that the specific rule could be viewed in the online Fishing Guide. This proposed protocol would reduce by a year the time to change a rule and allow the change to be implemented the following year after the decision is made to make the change. With this new method, the walleye regulation would never be more restrictive than the overall state walleye regulation but if there was a walleye die off or some other drastic reduction in walleye abundance in Saginaw Bay an emergency order could be implemented within a month or two. The Fisheries Chief would have the authority to change to this new protocol. No opposition to changing to the new rule notification method was expressed during the meeting.

Proposed regulation change process

Year 1	Year 2
<i>May/June:</i> model updates and survey analysis <i>June/July:</i> meeting between research and managers <i>August:</i> consultation with stakeholders <i>August/September:</i> Chief review <i>Fall/Winter:</i> NRC review and decision	<i>April 1:</i> regulation implemented

Update on several new and potential research projects in Saginaw Bay (Dr. Dave Fielder and Dr. Brian Roth, Michigan State University Professor).

The following is just a brief description of new and proposed studies. As the results are compiled these studies will be discussed in more detail at future meetings.

Movement and Survival of Stocked Cisco in Saginaw Bay

To follow the movement and survival of the cisco, electronic transmitters will be placed in a number of the larger fall fingerlings this fall and stocked with the unmarked fish. Acoustic receivers will be placed in the bay to follow the movement of the fish. If a cisco is eaten, that will be known because a different type of signal will be sent to the receivers.

Saginaw Bay Hypoxia or Dead Zones

These are areas in the bay with not enough oxygen for fish and other organisms to live. These areas can be found in the bay in late summer and during some winters. Oxygen loggers will be placed on the bottom to monitor the oxygen to determine the extent of the problem.

Coreyon Reef Post-Construction Evaluation

This study will be a follow-up to building the reef to determine what species are inhabiting the new habitat and learn if fish are using the reef for spawning. Preliminary results are showing that walleyes are using the reefs for spawning.

Kawkawlin Reef Feasibility Study

This is a survey of the bottom that is occurring now to determine if it is feasible to build a reef in this area similar to the Coreyon Reef. This reef would be used not only for fish spawning habitat but also for sediment management. The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy is doing preliminary surveying now.

Cisco Reintroduction and Evaluation

This is the 4th year of the cisco stocking program and mature fish should be returning. It is estimated that the older cisco should be about 11 to 12 inches long. Both the DNR and USFWS will be conducting surveys beginning this fall to determine if the mature cisco are surviving and residing in the area.

Sources of Walleye Reproduction in Saginaw Bay

A grant has been written to support this study and it is hoped that it will be funded. It is known where some Saginaw Bay walleyes are spawning but this study will determine if offshore reefs are used along with determining the extent the various tributaries to the bay are being utilized. Acoustic telemetry will be used to mark walleyes caught offshore and then follow them with receivers placed in the bay and throughout Lake Huron. Electronic transmitters would be placed in 150 walleyes the first year and 200 walleyes the second year. The marked fish would then be followed for 4 years.

Discard Mortality of Walleye in Saginaw Bay State-Licensed Commercial Fishery

Dave Fielder: A study was done in 2012 to determine the commercial bycatch of walleyes. This was undertaken with a Michigan State student working with commercial fisher, Dana Serafin. The results of that study are used in the Model to determine the abundance of walleyes in the bay each year. Because conditions in the lake could have changed, we are considering conducting the study again. The new data would increase the accuracy of the Model estimates. The goal would be to

extend the study to more than one fisher, follow the fish for a time period after being released and determine if the sinkers are surviving.

Brian Roth: The 2012 study involved much work and there would have to be a positive interaction between the student and the commercial fishers. The study would take a lot of collaboration, but this would be a fantastic and very worthwhile study. We are interested.

Dana Serafin: Would not have a problem with doing it again but felt that the not much use was made of the results. Also, wanted to know when the study would begin.

Dave F: The results were very useful in the Model predicting the abundance of walleyes each year. It would take about a year to secure the funding and another year to conduct the study.

Frank: The Committee is very interested in having another study conducted and I am sure the Advisors would provide support if needed for a grant.

Progress being made under the new Cormorant Management Program in Saginaw Bay:

A new permit system for states and tribes began in March. The country is divided into regions and Michigan belongs to the Interior zone with 23 other states. Up to 78,632 cormorants have been authorized to be killed in this region. Michigan was ready to implement the system and as of 2 weeks ago, Michigan was the only state to receive a permit. The state of Michigan can contract with other agencies to manage the bird. This year, DNR choose to use only USDA Wildlife Services. Our permit is for about 9,650 cormorants and 1,400 active nests. Probably, we will use only about 1/3 of the number of birds allowed to be taken.

The cormorant count for 2021 showed that the cormorants on Little Charity Island, which is the main nesting colony in the bay, nearly doubled to 1,837 nests compared to 2019 when the last survey was done. There were 142 nests on Spoils Island. This is the largest concentration of nests in the Michigan waters of the Great Lakes. At all the other locations around Michigan the count either remained nearly steady or went down.

The state cannot go on Charity Island to control the birds because it is federally owned, however, the state is working with the Fish and Wildlife Service to calculate a sustainable number of birds for the Island. It appears the final number will be in the 1,500 nest range so that might not allow a meaningful further reduction of birds i in the bay. The state could stand outside the Island and shoot the birds but that is an inefficient method of culling the cormorants.

For more detailed information on the cormorant program and the other slide presentations, use this link, <https://sites.google.com/msu.edu/lhcfac/home/past-meetings/august-2021>.

Adjourn: 3:30 p.m.