



Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain fishery resources of Lake Huron through better communication and partnership.

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting **Jay's Sporting Goods, Inc., Clare, Michigan** **Wednesday, August 30, 2017** **Draft**

Attendees: Rick Kretzschmar, Ken Merckel, Bryan Darland, Ed Retherford, Tom Hamilton, Eric Andersen, Charles Shaver, William Olar, Bob Golochowicz, Eric Morrow, Steve Shafto, Julie Shafto, Judy Ogden, Bob Reider, Ed Eisch, Aaron Switzer, Jerry Lockhart, Lance Campbell, Doreen Campbell, Randall Terrian, Frank Krist, Bruce Berger, Pete LeBaron, Tyler Williams, Cameron McMurry, Dana Serafin, Tom Burlison, Jack Cross, Randy Duff, Tim Duff, Tom Keerl, Brandon Schroeder, John Schrouder, Bob Kettner, Randy Claramunt, Patrick Hanchin, Terry Walsh, Jim Johnson, Jim DeClerck, Lindsey Henski, Jerry Brown, Ralph Zimmermann, Clarence Fatnoe, Leslie Bloodworth, Craig Milkowski, Gary Decker, Gary Whelan, Dave Fielder, Jim Baker, Donna Wesander, Gary Boersen, Todd Wills, Rick Colonna, John Moore, John Letts, Jeff Archambeau, Leo Mrozinski.

Welcome and Introductions: Frank Krist called the meeting to order and introductions were made. Frank introduced Gary Decker who is replacing Jack Nobel on the Advisory Committee. Gary is a member of the Great Lakes Bay Region Steelheaders that focus much of their effort in the Saginaw Bay area.

Discussion of the State/Tribal/US 2000 Great Lakes Consent Decree for northern Lake Huron: estimating the lake trout quotas, sharing the resource and potential impacts of liberalizing the harvest, (Randy Claramunt, DNR Lake Huron Basin Coordinator)

Stakeholder involvement: Randy discussed an article that modelled stakeholders trust and confidence in State agencies. The thought was that technical competence would be the primary driver in stakeholder trust, but the result of a recent study was that **transparency** and **procedural fairness** were the most important. Trust is no longer gained by simply demonstrating technical competence. Stakeholders want meaningful involvement in the decision process.

Lake trout management goals are:

- 1) Manage the harvest within biological and legal quotas
 - Reducing non-compliance
 - Minimize lake trout throw-back mortality
- 2) Promote fishing opportunities
 - Increase seasonal opportunities
 - Increase angler satisfaction and ultimately compliance
- 3) Promote rehabilitation of the lake trout population
 - Protect the spawning stocks (most spawning habitat occurs in the north)

Northern Lake Huron harvest and quota: In 2016 the state licensed anglers harvested 27,800 pounds of lake trout over the quota in lake trout management zone MH-1 from Rogers City to Drummond Island. The factors that affected the over harvest include:

- Total fishing effort by anglers nearly doubled in 2016 compared to 2015 but it was still half of the 2008 to 2012 average
- The number of lake trout caught per angler was up 40%
- The total lake trout observed in the creel was up 52%
- The proportion of anglers targeting trout and salmon was up 40%
- The average weight of a harvested lake trout was up 0.7 pounds or 18%

Lake trout management zone MH-2 from Rogers City through Thunder Bay was under quota by 49,500 pounds. Management zone MH-1 has about twice the shoreline and more angling effort than MH-2 yet the quota for MH-2 is more than twice as large as MH-1. When these quotas were originally established in 2000, Chinook Salmon were the primary fish caught by anglers and lake trout were a minor component of the fishery. At that time there was little interest in lake trout harvest. Current, discussions have centered around combining MH-1 and MH-2. If the quotas for both management zones were combined then there would have been no overharvest of lake trout in 2016. Since the signing of the 2000 Decree, the models and quotas have historically been generated and implemented independently for MH-1 and MH-2. However, since there is no divider in the water, one biological model now exists that treats MH-1 and MH-2 along with the adjacent Canadian waters as one unit. Combining the units is biologically based and is a practical approach to reducing the chances of a lake trout overharvest in these zones. Discussions are continuing with both the 5 Tribes, United States, and stakeholders on moving forward with combining the quotas in MH-1 and MH-2.

The new biological model projected a substantial increase in the abundance of lake trout. In the event the parties do not agree to an increase in the quota to resolve the 2016 over-harvest, then a deviation rule would potentially allow for a 15% increase in quotas. This means that the MH-1 harvest limit in 2017 will be 30,248 pounds and the MH-1 harvest limit in 2018 would be 46,801 pounds if a 20,000-pound estimated over harvest penalty was imposed for 2017. Currently, the lake trout harvest is down significantly from 2016 and the hope is that the 2017 quota when established will not be exceeded and no penalty will be needed during 2018.

Jim Johnson commented that it is more biologically based to combine the two units. Small management units are not realistic, and the data show the fish move throughout the zones.

The Lake trout population in the central and southern sections of Lake Huron appear to be declining. Jim Johnson and Ji He are in the process of completing a report that indicated the lake trout abundance of older fish in the central and southern sections of Lake Huron appear to be declining sharply. Two possible causes were discussed. Some of the older fish may not be adequately sampled during the surveys because the fish could be inhabiting offshore reefs that are not currently monitored and a high harvest of lake trout by the Canadian commercial fishery may be significantly impacting the fishery. It was suggested that the Committee should continue the discussion it started over a year ago about developing a lake trout allocation agreement with Ontario. The plan is to have this topic on the agenda at the first Committee meeting in 2018.

Examining all sources of walleye mortality in Saginaw Bay and the potential impacts on the sustainability and quality of the fishery along with an update on the proposed commercial fishery statute, (Dave Fielder, DNR Great Lakes Research Biologist and Randy Claramunt, DNR Lake Huron Basin Coordinator)

Information on the walleye population in Saginaw Bay is collected with many methods each year including:

- Gillnetting and trawling surveys within the Bay each year
- Creel surveys
- Commercial fishing reporting
- Walleye jaw tagging
- Telemetry or digital walleye tagging
- Main Basin prey fish surveys

The walleyes move in and out of Saginaw Bay and are caught by recreational and commercial fisheries (state, tribal and Ontario) throughout the Main Basin of Lake Huron and in several rivers. The walleyes begin moving out of the Bay during May and June. Mortalities from the recreational and commercial fisheries throughout Lake Huron along with the natural mortality are used to predict survival and the future population size.

This information and the data that have been collected over the previous years is run through two biological models that enable predictions of how the walleye population might perform the following years under various conditions. Since conditions are constantly changing from year to year, many runs of the model can be made with slightly different conditions each time to learn what circumstances will likely decrease or increase the walleye population. The results will show if the walleye population is likely to increase, decrease or remain stable in the coming years. There, of course, is uncertainty associated with the results but the predictions assist managers to determine if fishing regulations should be changed. Some of the sources of uncertainty are;

- Weather and other environmental conditions
- Inability to measure all items accurately
- Not all contributing factors are known
- Fish populations do not always react as expected

There is interest in learning what the by-kill of walleyes is in Saginaw Bay annually. A study was conducted by observing onboard two commercial fishing operations from May through August during 2010. Since fishing occurs from early spring through the fall the results were projected over the entire season. In addition, because only a portion of the commercial fishing operations within the bay were observed, the results were estimated for all the fishing operations during the entire season. This was accomplished since the amount of by-kill from the operations that were not observed could be determined from a percentage of reported harvest of the target species, yellow perch. It appeared that the walleye by-kill was proportional to the catch of yellow perch. Because the results from all the fishing operations were not directly measured, the values are uncertain. Also, it is uncertain how a change in the commercial fishing regulations might impact the walleye by-kill. Regulation changes could impact fishing effort, lift frequency and license reactivation or retirement. Therefore, even though the study estimated that the total by-kill during the entire 2010 season from all commercial fishers at 101,000 walleyes, the results could be significantly lower or possibly higher.

If the commercial fishing by-kill of walleye remained at or below 15% of the recreational walleye harvest as suggested in the proposed commercial fishing statute, then management of the recreational fishery will not be impacted appreciably. Concern remains, however, as the 2010 study estimated a by-kill significantly higher than 15%. It would be beneficial to conduct further research to determine more accurately what the by-kill of walleye is in Saginaw Bay.

Calculations with the recently updated model showed that the current liberalized walleye regulations should be scaled back. Regulation changes for 2018 will be formulated this winter and discussed at the spring Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meeting. Likely some retreat to a more conservative regulation combination will be recommended but the changes may not be reduced all the way back to the original 5 fish limit and 15-inch minimum length limit.

Key questions left to answer for both the walleye and yellow perch fisheries:

If walleye mortality must be reduced to maintain sustainability, which fishery will make the adjustment? Recreational, Commercial or both? How?

What if we lose 'recovery' and there is a drop back into an unrecovered condition? How would that affect the commercial allocation?

How will we settle on measures of sustainability? Who decides?

Is sustainability our only concern or do we want to include measures of the quality of the recreational fishery in decision making?

Participants discussed walleye by-kill. There was interest in learning more about the amount and exact mechanisms causing the by-kill. It was asked if measures could be implemented to reduce by-kill. It is apparent that more work is needed investigating walleye by-kill.

A lively discussion ensued concerning the status of the proposed commercial fishing statute. Currently, the review and moving forward process appears to be on hold. It is not clear, how additional public input on the proposed statute will be obtained.

Continuation of developing a Salmon and Trout Management Plan for Lake Huron: Atlantic Salmon options, (Aaron Switzer, Manager Platte River, Oden and Harrietta State Fish Hatcheries; Ed Eisch, DNR Fish Production Program Manager and Randy Claramunt DNR Lake Huron Basin Coordinator)

Aaron Switzer distributed an issue statement presented to the Lake Huron Basin Team. This issue statement is requesting a change in the number of Atlantic salmon that will be raised at the Platte River Hatchery. Internally, this statement was just discussed with the DNR staff for the first time yesterday on August 29.

Atlantic salmon react to many stressors including temperature spikes, disease, etc. The Platte River State Fish Hatchery has dealt with challenges over time, including dissolved gas, water flow, light, and rearing density problems. Preventing disease is a constant struggle which has prevented reaching the rearing target of 180,000 spring yearling Atlantic salmon annually.

Many improvements have been made resulting in successful rearing of the Atlantic salmon to approximately 6 ½ inches in length at stocking size. Much has been learned. In the beginning, there was uncertainty on the best approach to raising the Atlantic salmon and since brown trout are closely related, similar raising techniques were used originally. However, Atlantic salmon are more full-bodied at 6 ½ inches than brown trout. At 6 ½ inches long the fatter Atlantic salmon need more space and there is not enough room in the raceways to accommodate the target of 180,000 fish.

If the number of Atlantic salmon produced each year is not reduced, not only will the health of the Atlantic salmon be an issue, but also the health of the other fish produced in the hatchery will be in jeopardy. Overcrowding causes stress and an increase in bacterial infections, which are the leading cause of mortality for all fish species raised at the Platte River Hatchery. Atlantic salmon need to be on first-past water and if the Atlantic salmon are infected, the disease organisms will flow downstream causing disease issues for the Coho salmon. To combat the disease, a special feed treated with antibiotics is used. This special feed is higher in phosphorus which resulted in two, total phosphorus discharge violations. The Hatchery is operating according to a Consent Agreement under the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System and violations can have dire consequences.

To deal with these constraints, new options need to be examined. Any changes made will be implemented for the 2019 stocking class since the 2018 stocking class is already in the hatchery.

Experience has shown that 100,000 Atlantic salmon is the maximum number that can be raised at the Platte River Hatchery. Besides the density concern, temperature is another stressor. The hatchery uses surface water and the temperatures varies regularly. If the water temperature reaches 46.5^o F and above, disease issues increase. Potentially, reducing the number of fish in the raceways when the water warms may help. It might be beneficial to consider planting some of the fish at smaller sizes at stocking locations with fewer predators.

Randy Claramunt discussed the issue statement format and decision making. Five options were provided, and a sixth option was suggested. The options are listed below:

1. Allocate the Atlantic salmon evenly across the four recommended stocking sites.
2. Allocate based on relative returns with actual proportions determined after the 2017 collections.
3. Allocate fish 50:50 to the two sites with the highest returns.

4. Same as #3, but stock the other two sites with fall fingerlings
5. Basin team develops options or status quo
6. Added, Option #1, except move Au Sable River plant to a shoreline plant

The Lake Huron Basin Team has not made a decision and is seeking input. All options are still being reviewed. It was mentioned that there appears to be an increase in the return this season of the DNR hatchery raised fish released last year in the St Marys River from the holding pen implemented the first time in 2016. After much discussion, it was suggested that a decision on choosing an option should be delayed until the winter meeting after the creel data are compiled from this season. Aaron Switzer commented that having the creel data from this season would be helpful.

Question: Since the number of hatchery produced Atlantic salmon may have to be reduced, could the State build a hatchery primarily for Atlantic salmon?

Answer: Randy Claramunt stressed that reducing the rearing targets is not reducing the program but maximizing survival of the fish, both in the hatchery and in the wild, by looking realistically at the raising capacity of the hatchery to produce optimal size fish for stocking. Considering the current political climate, it is unlikely that a new hatchery will be built in the near future.

Question: Doreen Campbell asked if the old Chinook salmon stocking pen structure that is still present upstream from the Au Sable River could be used to hold Atlantic salmon like the large holding pen the DNR is experimenting with at the St Marys River stocking site?

Answer: Staff will investigate the option.

Committee vote on the above 6 options:

Result: Wait and review 2017 season creel data before deciding which option to implement.

The discussion will continue at the winter meeting after the creel data from the 2017 season are compiled.

Cormorant update, (Randy Claramunt and Frank Krist)

Congressman Bergman has been working to have the US Fish and Wildlife Service change their priority and begin to update the Double Crested Cormorant Environmental Assessment to allow the states and tribes to use lethal methods to control the birds. Congress is on break and that has been hampering the efforts. Frank has been in regular contact with Congressman Bergman's Office. The Les Cheneaux Islands have seen a 46% increase in the number of birds this season when only a 19% increase was anticipated. This shows the heavy impacts of not controlling the birds. Frank encouraged the participants to contact their US Representative and Senators. Sending photos of the increase in birds would be helpful.

There is \$100,000 in the DNR budget for cormorant control but because lethal control of the birds cannot be utilized, the money is being used for nest counts and other assessment work. Next year, there is the risk of losing that general fund money since assessment costs are less than actively controlling the birds.

Note Cormorant Update: attached is a new fact sheet from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) that indicates they are completing an Environmental Assessment that evaluates options for the issuance of depredation permits for lethal control of cormorants where there is either significant economic damage to fish production facilities (aquaculture); significant damage to native vegetation; significant impact on a threatened or endangered species; or significant human safety risks. Unfortunately, this Environmental Assessment review does not cover protecting recreational and commercial fisheries by allowing lethal control of cormorants to protect free swimming fish. The US Fish and Wildlife Service indicates that once they complete the first review, they will begin working to analyze the impact that cormorants have on recreational and commercial fisheries. The reason that the FWS is working on aquaculture and safety issues first is stakeholders concerned about these issues put strong pressure on their Congressional Delegation and insisted that lethal control of the birds is critical.

To ensure that the US Fish and Wildlife Service completes the second Environmental Assessment that allows lethal control of the birds to protect fisheries, a strong response from us is needed by contacting our US Representatives and Senators and encourage them to pressure the US Fish and Wildlife Service to move quickly to complete the second Environmental Assessment that allows the lethal take of cormorants to protect free swimming fish. As mentioned above, it is very important for us to contact our Congresspersons often to obtain updates on the progress being made to provide lethal control of the cormorants to protect the recreational and commercial fisheries.

Fisheries and Law Enforcement Manager updates:

Craig Milkowski, Law Enforcement Division – Larry DesLoover was going to retire in July, but will be staying until October. Goose Island between Mackinaw and Hessel had 50 cormorants counted on the island, with an additional 50 flying around. There were no birds reported there previously. The Commercial Fish unit will be getting 5 more officers but unfortunately, 3 will be retiring by February. The plan is to replace the departing 3 as well. The unit will also be getting 5 detectives; one per district. The unit is receiving two boats for the great lakes; one with a net puller and one unmarked. There have been five net complaints in the past month alone. Two reports were groundless, 1 net was pulled before we could respond, and 2 nets were caught on old net stakes. The unit received a submersible to aid with body recovery and pulling nets. The submersible is equipped with a camera/video, can lift to 12,000 pounds, and has cutting capabilities. By December, 25 new recruits should be in the field.

Patrick Hanchin, Fisheries Division – MH-1 and MH-2 lake trout overharvest issue may be resolved this year. We had one unproductive meeting and we are hopeful.

Aaron Switzer, Fisheries Division – At Oden, a tree fell on a raceway building, crushing the roofline. We are on target for raising brown trout and rainbow trout. Everything is going well at the Harrietta Hatchery. Platte continues to rear Atlantic salmon. There was a temperature spike after a storm resulting in a fungal outbreak but we did receive approval today to treat the fish. Coho look good this year.

Ed Eisch, Fisheries Division – There are no hatchery production issues. The steelhead raised at Thompson and Wolf Lake hatcheries are growing to be the largest ever stocked. Coded wire tag marking is scheduled to begin soon. Based on fishing reports it is shaping up to be a good salmon run this year. Work is ongoing updating the Little Manistee Weir and the Thompson Fish Hatchery.

Todd Wills, Fisheries Division – The round goby assessment work with USGS and the DNR in Thunder Bay has been completed. The DNR used beam trawls, Go Pro cameras, etc. along the reefs, in conjunction with USGS bottom trawling. The work is comparing how many gobies are viewed by cameras with the results from different methods of bottom net trawling. The data have not been compiled but an update will be provided to this Committee during the winter. The Lake St. Clair station hired a new biologist, Andrew Briggs. He worked with USFW for 5 years before coming to the DNR. He will be working on the R/V Tanner and the R/V Channel Cat this fall.

Donna Wesander, Fisheries Division – The Lake Michigan anglers are happier this year. Salmon fishing has been good with a lot of Coho reported. On Lake Huron anglers from Saginaw Bay have glowing reports; good reports as well are coming from Lake Erie.

Jim Baker, Fisheries Division – Spring fingerling walleye harvest is completed. We planted 988,528 fingerlings into 34 inland lakes in 21 counties in three management units. The Kawkawlin Pond will be drained in late September to harvest fall fingerlings. We have operated a small pond to produce fathead minnows to feed these fish up to a larger size. The larger fall fingerlings will go into lakes where spring fingerlings have not survived well.

The Sanford Lake pike marsh produced 3,410 fingerlings, average length 4.7 inches, and they were planted into 5 inland lakes within our unit.

Spring and summer lake and stream surveys are done. We surveyed 7 inland lakes and 8 sections of various rivers and streams. In addition, we assisted Northern Lake Huron on some work on the Au Sable River. Walleye stocking evaluations will be done in late September.

While electrofishing the Frankenmuth Impoundment on the Cass River on July 28th in cooperation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to evaluate the Frankenmuth rock ramp, our crew turned up 5 HUGE flathead catfish (all 25 lb. +). These have never been seen in the impoundment before and must have moved through the fishway to get into the impoundment.

We will be busy over the next two weeks assisting Alpena and Mt. Clemens as the research vessels come into Saginaw Bay for the annual Fish Community Survey. They will start setting nets on September 5th.

We had a historic event in our unit on August 21st when we planted 193 lake sturgeon fingerlings in the Tittabawassee River. We hope to make this a regular event in hopes of building a sturgeon population that will eventually repopulate Saginaw Bay. Unfortunately, we probably will not be around to see it, as lake sturgeon take 20 to 25 years to reach sexual maturity. Some of the males from this plant may start running the river as early as 2037, and the females sometime after that. We are scheduled to receive 200 more fingerlings in late September or early October. These fish are the progeny of parents from the Upper St. Clair River and have been reared at the federal hatchery in Genoa, Wisconsin. All of the sturgeon fingerling that go into the Tittabawassee are tagged with PIT tags.

After a slow start last spring due to a lot of windy weather, walleye fishing in Saginaw Bay this summer was very good all the way through the middle of July, with 8-fish limit catches common. Walleye fishing around the tip of the Thumb was also really good through this period. Fishing started tapering off in late July and into August, but it usually does at this time of year. Perch fishing started up in early August and should get better through the fall.

Other than that, it has been a pretty normal summer. There were a couple local fish kills, went to a lot of meetings, and reviewed a lot of DEQ permits and oil & gas leases.

Dave Fielder, Fisheries Division – The reef restoration project in Saginaw Bay is on hold. The project was not funded.

Gary Whalen, Fisheries Division – All surveys were completed on schedule this year across the units. Fall sampling will begin very soon. There was a large outbreak of VHS in Lake St Clair this spring and thousands of fish were lost. VHS was also found in the baitfish supply as well. Great Lakes musky eggs were not taken this year due to VHS outbreak. Efforts have been made to eradicate the exotic Red Swamp Crayfish from a small pond, but in spite of intensive work to collect the crayfish, no noticeable dent was made in the population. They are being found in other water bodies as well.

Brandon Schroeder, Michigan Sea Grant – We are in the planning process for the next four years. Fisheries is one major area we spend a lot of time. Regarding Lake Huron, we will be continuing our spring workshop series. The retired research vessel, the RV Chinook, was given to the Besser Museum in Alpena and the Museum is looking to develop a Past, Present and Future exhibit on it.

Dave Borgeson, Fisheries Division (read by Randy) – Our unit finished our Hubbard Lake survey and there is a good population of walleye present. A St. Marys River wide assessment is taking place this year with assistance from Ontario. Two new invasives have been found in our unit.

Randy Claramunt, Fisheries Division – Randy thanked everyone for their participation and for the candid conversation. This is good communication.

Adjourn 3:05 pm