

Lake Michigan Citizen's Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Jay's Sporting Goods

April 11th, 2022 - 10:30 AM to 3:00 PM

Attendees:

Denny Grinold, Jay Wesley, Scott Lutz, Jim Fenner, Jim Bos, Tim Hossack, Mike Radcliffe, Mike Marsh, Bill Winowiecki, Mark Williams, Kevin Hughes, Eric Braden, Tom Andris, Frank Krist, Scott Heintzelman, , Mike Verhamme, Gregg Mariuz, Dean Jessup, CT Shuman, John Stegmeier, Tony Radjenovich, George Freeman, Jeff Dehn, Blaise Pewinski, Ed Blissick, Dennis Eade, Kendra Kozlauskos, Chuck Pistis, Jim Johnson, Dan O'Keefe, Addie Dutton, Ben Turschak, Dave Caroffino, Brian Gunderman. Via TEAMS – Lawrence Atkins, David Cozad, Heather Hettinger, Jory Jonas Randy Claramunt, Ed Erdelac, Bob Reider, Christian LeSage, Paul Jensen, Frank Pearson, Dave Clapp

Advisor Reports:

- 2022 Fishing Season out of St. Joseph, MI.: From a river fisherman perspective, I would say fall run Steelhead continue to be down in numbers. Decent nearshore Summer Run Steelhead fishery in May, June and July. Fall King run non-existent. Spring Coho last year not nearly as strong as this year. This year's spring fishery very good although size is on the smaller side (1-2 lbs.). Bait was plentiful for a majority offshore season. Salmon were spotty with a few very good days. Around 4-1 trout to salmon catches generally. Approximately 50% of salmon harvested were 1mclipped. Coho seemed to be available all season offshore. Trout were available with the bite getting tougher as the season went on. Seeing plenty of bait fish throughout the season. The King Salmon was only local in St. Joe for a couple of weeks in May and then moved North. The King fishing then was spotty the rest of the year and they seemed smaller in size. The lake trout fishing was consistent all year long and we seemed to catch a few more Steelhead than normal.
- 2022 Fishing Season out of South Haven, MI: The Black River in South Haven gave up some nice steelhead over the fall and winter. Several were in the 12 lb. class. It may have been that the mild winter weather allowed more access than in the past, but a lot of angler effort along the banks of the river and some boats out on weekends. So far this spring, there have been a lot of coho caught off the piers and while trolling shallow water south to the Palisades plant. Limits were taken in a ve1y short time. We got a 3-man limit in two passes in 1 hour 45 minutes and threw back 3 fish when pulling lines. The coho are small 1.5 to 2 lbs., but I've heard there were some bigger ones in the New Buffalo area. Some browns were caught this spring also including one over 8 lbs. This is the best early spring fishing we've had in many years. Maybe lack of ice on the lake has something to do with it. The theory here is they may have been out there before; we just couldn't get to them. South Haven Perch fishing was extremely poor last summer. Either they weren't there, or we couldn't find them. It was not lack of effort. Several avid perch fishermen said they did not do well at all.
- 2022 Fishing Season out of Holland, MI.: Last year was an ok year with a lot of juvenile

salmon around for most of the year. June was horrible as usual but more so because the inshore trout have been fished out around Holland and Saugatuck. The average size of big kings seemed to be a little smaller as well last year.

- 2022 Fishing Season out of Grand Haven, MI: Grand Haven provided a great season for Steelheaders. Lots of kings 8-15 lbs. June was slow but that's now the routine. July was good to very good. Good mix kings to trout. Steelhead down. In general, 4yr fish are 5-Slbs. lighter than in previous years. Lots of bait!!!!
- St. Joe has been fantastic for Coho Salmon although they are on the small side.
- Drowned river mouth lakes have been great for walleye this winter.
- Kalamazoo River Steelhead fishing has been poor with low water in the fall and winter and now flood waters this spring.
- Manistee area has been good for Brown Trout with over 180 reported. The Brown Trout seem to prefer the turbid waters. There are a few Coho Salmon in the area too.
- Frankfort has had 8-10 boats out and have caught some Brown Trout up to 6-8 pounds. There seem to be a good amount of Lake Trout.
- Betsie River has been good for steelhead.
- Grand Traverse bays have been good for Lake Trout.
- Manistee River steelhead fishing has been good.
- Ludington Brown Trout has been better the last two springs, and Lake Trout are available. Some Coho Salmon are around, and there are smelt off the pier.
- Lake Huron Coho Salmon continue to be caught down in the Detroit River up to Port Sanilac this spring.
- West Grand Traverse Bay has Lake Trout with alewife, smelt, and gobies in the diet. Catching some 18 to 19-inch Lake Whitefish. Already seeing an alewife die off.
- Pentwater had some good perch over winter. It has been confirmed that the North Branch of the Pentwater River is producing wild Chinook Salmon, Coho Salmon, Steelhead and Brown Trout. Anglers often had good success at the Pentwater Port, and the production of wild salmon and trout may be part of that success.

Review of Committee Members:

- The Lake Michigan Citizen's Fishery Advisory Committee roster of voting members was distributed with a recommendation to review and send updates to the Chair.

Review of Terms of Reference:

- All Great Lakes Citizen's Fishery Advisory Committees share one common Terms of Reference.
- Advisory Committees are citizen-based committees that are charged with reviewing and providing recommendations and direction into fishery goals, objectives, and management plans.
- Currently, recommendations are provided at meetings and through email and are made publicly through the meeting minutes that are posted on the DNR website.
- Committee members often bring up issues that other groups and clubs may be interested in advocating for.

- Occasionally, the committee will provide letters of support or non-support.
- In over 30 years of task force and advisor committee meetings, there have not been any resolutions proposed, and there is not a process to bring or approve resolutions.
- There was a draft resolution regarding some aspects of the proposed consent decree that was circulated to some advisor members that was then changed to a letter of non-support (see Consent Decree discussion).

Alewife Mortality Model and Predator Prey Auxiliary Indicators:

- Ben Turschak of the Charlevoix Research Station provided results of the 2022 auxiliary indicators. These data are collected and analyzed by Federal, Tribal, State, and University partners.
 - The 2022 Predator Prey Ratio is still being developed. In the meantime, we can look at the auxiliary indicators.
 - The standard weight of 35-inch Chinook Salmon has remained between 17 and 19 pounds the past six years, which is up from a low in 2015 of 15 pounds.
 - The average weight of an Age-3 female Chinook Salmon has been between 18 and 21 pounds the past six years with a low in 2015 of 12.5 pounds. There seems to be annual variability among the weirs and harbors where this information is collected.
 - Harvest and harvest rate have been low like the time period during the Bacterial Kidney Disease die off in the 1990s. Harvest increased the last two years to about 75,000 fish, which is down from the 2012 high harvest of over 200,000 fish.
 - Chinook salmon continue to be the most harvested fish in Lake Michigan followed by Coho Salmon, Lake Trout, Steelhead, and Brown Trout.
 - Based on the auxiliary indicators, the 2022 Predator Prey Ratio is estimated to be like 2021 and possibly slightly higher.
- Average annual mortality of age 1+ alewife is based on static natural mortality and fluctuating predation from the Predator Prey Model. Looking through the data series for alewife biomass, Lake Michigan was gaining biomass when alewife mortality was 0.30 or below and was losing biomass when alewife mortality was above 0.55.
 - Perhaps a Management strategy is to regulate predation mortality depending on your alewife biomass goal. To increase alewife biomass, predation mortality should be below 0.3. To maintain stable alewife biomass, predation mortality should be 0.3 to 0.55. To decrease alewife biomass, predation mortality should be above 0.55.
 - Based on current predator mortality and the recent increase in Chinook salmon stocking, we estimate stable alewife biomass that could decrease soon without a good year class of alewife.
- Discussion after presentation:
 - This is easy to understand and makes sense.

- Alewife recruitment was an issue with the recent Structured Decision Analysis workshop and model inputs with MSU. There is a need to update the alewife recruitment model, and Ben is working with modelers to do that.
- How can we predict recruitment? Difficult to do because we need to know temperature, currents, precipitation, nutrient inputs, etc. If we could better predict long term weather, we might be able to predict year class strength. Right now, we often have a decent idea of year class strength during fall acoustic and midwater trawl assessments.
- How much was the die off? There was no confirmed cause of the die off although temperature changes, disease, and poor condition were all speculated. No agency tried to enumerate the biomass of the die off because it is difficult to do. Alewife have a history in the Great Lakes for large die offs especially when their biomass is relatively high.

Grand River Coho Salmon Stocking Change

- Addie Dutton, lead Fish Biologist for the Grand River Watershed, provided information on Coho Salmon and Steelhead stocking in the upper Grand River. The fish ladder project connecting Lake Michigan migrating salmon to the City of Lansing suggested high stocking numbers in Lansing to create a return fishery. Fish ladder counts and past creel surveys suggested that returns were low suggesting that mortality may be high as the smolts move down through the system and through large hydropower dams. The Webber Dam is 33 ft high while the rest of the dams are 5 to 11 ft. Most Coho Salmon have been moved to Lyons while there are still 38,000 stocked in Lansing. Along with Coho there are 22,825 Steelhead stocked in Lansing and an additional 3,000 stocked in the Red Cedar River. The Lansing Dam spill gates are not working properly, so the fish ladder may not have enough flow to promote good fish passage. One recommendation is to move some or all stocked fish to just below Webber Dam as there is access there now and a new boat launch is also in the works. This should reduce mortality of smolts going through or over the Webber Dam.
- Group discussion:
 - Makes sense to move some downstream.
 - Portland Dam flows may not attract fish towards the fish ladder.
 - Don't move both at the same time.
 - Stock down by Grand Haven
 - There is general interest to move both Coho Salmon and Steelhead downstream to increase survival.

Brown Trout Stocking Preliminary Review

- Lake-wide Brown Trout Harvest from all states has declined from 700,000 pounds in the 1980s to only 28,000 pounds in 2020. All states have seen a decline including Wisconsin.
- In 2017, the Lake Michigan Citizen's Advisors recommended cutting 200,000 Brown Trout and increasing Chinook Salmon stocking.

- Zonal Management Concepts were accepted that concentrated all stocking near coldwater tributaries and deep water in Lake Michigan putting all stocking at Ludington and to the north.
- The five-year evaluation time is now up so an official review is underway.
- Brown Trout are currently being stocked in Petoskey, Menominee, Glen Arbor, Empire, Frankfort, Manistee, and Ludington.
- For evaluation, we at least like to see 2% return from stocking using creel, charter boat and anecdotal data and information.
- Despite increased stocking numbers in Ludington, Manistee, and Frankfort, none of the sites reached the 2% return goal based on creel, charter boat, and anecdotal data. Petoskey was close but most of the fish harvested or caught there are straight from the stocking truck.
- Green Bay is considered a decent Brown Trout fishery although the numbers are a fraction of what they used to be in the 1980s and 1990s. Green Bay is barely reaching the 2% goal on some years and is below on most years.
- Ports where stocking was discontinued see some harvest suggesting that Brown Trout will move large distances. Grand Haven historically had good harvest of Brown Trout despite no stocking prior to 2003.
- Options to consider: discontinue all browns and increase Chinook; keep current numbers and sites; keep some, remove some and add some; if add some, consider a southern port.
- Discussion
 - Southern Ports have dirty water and drowned river mouth lakes that might benefit spring Brown Trout fishing.
 - White Lake and Pentwater areas have also been good for Brown Trout.
 - The current sites offer a spring fishery for small boats.
 - The South already has an excellent Coho fishery.
 - In Empire, anglers are just getting out.
 - Stay the course
 - Keep places now and stock in the south.
 - Expand the program
 - Boats can get out year around in the south so add a port down there.
 - Add creel clerks in March to capture this fishery.
 - Opportunity for a nearshore fishery.
- There was general support from the advisors to keep the current numbers and try a port in the south. Some ports should also be evaluated in March by creel.

Advisor Quick Questions/Discussion Topics

- Steelhead information review: there is a lot of data being collected right now but none of it is analyzed to provide a presentation. We plan to provide updates on the Manistee and Muskegon River creels, the Social Survey, Coded-Wire Tag recovery data, and the Mortality Study as analyses are completed for each.

- Lake Huron Coho Salmon: there are 100,000 yearling Coho Salmon and all available fall fingerlings stocked in Lake Huron. A good spring fishery has been established from the Detroit River up to Port Sanilac.
- Cormorants: The 2023 permit allows the lethal take of 9,050 birds and 2,000 nests/eggs. We contract with Wildlife Services, and there currently no funding to support the program. There used to be \$150,000 of General Fund support. We would need \$250,000 General Fund support for a stable program.
- Salmon Bag Limit: This often comes up. Other states around Lake Michigan would stay at five as well as the other Great Lakes. Coho complicate the regulation. It is easier to manage salmon stocking when alewives are high or low.
- Offshore Fish Cleaning: Florida and other coastal states require this. Wisconsin has old commercial laws that do allow this. In Michigan, offal (fish guts) are considered litter and it is illegal to litter in Michigan. The Statute would need changed and would require support from many angling groups. Advisors should work together to get the support.

DNR Report

- Randy Claramunt is the new Fisheries Division Chief
- 2,000 Steelhead at the weir with egg takes starting soon.
- Fish heads are now being processed by the USFWS. Kendra is getting letters out soon, and we are looking at an online option for anglers to look up where their tagged fish came from to save on future mailings.
- 100% of Charter Boat reporting is online now.
- Charter Boat marketing Ad campaign using CARES ACT Funds.
- There have been several promotions in Law Enforcement.
- A small Conservation Officer Academy is expected in late 2023 for experience law enforcement candidates.
- New boats are coming online for Law Great Lakes patrols.
- Officers were busy this winter with Aquatic Invasive Species enforcement with fish haulers and pet shops.

Great Lakes Fishery Commission Advisor Report

- There is a resolution in front of the GL Advisors to transition Canadian fiduciary responsibilities for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to go from Fisheries and Oceans Canada to Global Affairs Canada.
- The Commission is also trying to get Canada to maintain and increase their investments in the Great Lakes. This was also a discussion topic when President Biden visited Canada.

Proposed Consent Decree

- Vice Chair Bill Winowiecki asked to have this topic on the agenda.
- Retired Research Biologist Jim Johnson started the discussion with a presentation about historic and present Lake Whitefish and Lake Trout fisheries.

- To see a piece of the commercial fishery and research history, visit the Besser Museum Fishery Heritage Project where you can board commercial and research vessels in dry dock.
- Recruitment of Lake Whitefish in Lake Huron and Michigan declined during the zebra mussel invasion and has been at extreme low levels since the quagga mussel invasion.
- Commercial harvest of Lake Whitefish is at its lowest point since 1990 in both lakes Michigan and Huron.
- The proposed Consent Decree expands the large mesh gill net zones in Lake Michigan.
- Concern for potential shift towards targeted effort of Lake Trout and Walleye in absence of Lake Whitefish.
- Excessive fishing mortality could significantly delay or make it impossible to achieve Lake Trout rehabilitation in lakes Michigan and Huron.
- Tony Radjenovich of the Coalition to Protect Michigan Resources described the difficult communications between the DNR and Amici through this negotiation. In 2022, the Amici were observers. In 1985 and 2000, they had a seat at the table.
- A discussion amongst the committee, Tony Radjenovich, and Dave Caroffino (Tribal Unit Manager) ensued. There were overwhelming negative and passionate comments against the proposed consent decree and the process for developing it. The topics were random and hard to follow for the minutes.
- Tim Hossack with the Northwest Michigan Fishing Club provided a letter of non-support for expanded gill netting for the committee to review and decide whether to approve, sign, and mail to decision makers. There was a motion to approve the letter. The motion was approved unanimously by advisors present in the room.
- Here is the main message from the letter drafted by members of the committee:

“Among the fishery management issues that have arisen in recent years, has been the decline in steelhead, lake trout, brown trout, salmon, whitefish, walleye, perch and every game fish in Lake Michigan. These population issues are not resolved with adding miles of gill nets, no state observers at weigh stations, no weigh stations, no control on daily take, and no intervention from the state until the 3-year mark, where all population may be irreversibly harmed by the large and small mesh gill nets. The proposed “honor system” of reporting is not a solution.

Considering the great expense of the state and federal hatcheries rearing and stocking as well as the value of these tributary fisheries to local economies, the LMCFAC is not in support of this proposed consent decree. We hope that the DNR Leadership, the GLFT, the NRC, The State AG’s Office, and the Governor’s office will consider this lack of support state-wide and begin anew with tribal options that protect the fishery.”

- The DNR’s position on the topics are covered in these frequently asked questions: <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/dnr-faqs/tribal-coordination/proposed-great-lakes-consent-decree>

- The advisors would like a review of the allowable catch at the fall meeting.

Next Meeting:

- October 18th, 2023 at Jay's Sporting Goods in Clare.

Adjourned at 3:30 PM