

January 7, 2009

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Minutes

Wednesday, January 7, 2009
Ram Conference Center
10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Attendees: Forrest Williams, Jim Johnson, David Fielder, Clarence Smith, William Jacobs, Paul Wendler, Larry DeSloover, Dave Borgeson, Tom Keerl, Jim DeClerck, Gene Raymond, William Becks, Ken Merckel, Frank Krist, Ron Beyer, Ed Retherford, Tom Hamilton, Ron Ramsey, Phil Babe, Fred Sterns, Kurt Newman, Jim Baker.

10:00 Welcome and Introductions (Frank Krist, Kurt Newman)

Everyone present introduced themselves.

Frank Krist encouraged members of the committee to speak up and bring issues to the group.

Lake Huron Management Plan, committee input (Kurt Newman, MDNR)

The LHCFAC has regularly encouraged the development of lake management plans. This committee will have many opportunities to review and provide input during the planning process. Others outside the committee will get this opportunity as well. Spring workshops will help in gathering input from outside the committee. Frank Lupi, Jim Dexter and Kurt Newman have been discussing alternative ways to gather input. An online workgroup is an option, with a survey developed to gain their input. This will be one of several surveys developed targeting different focus groups. This will take 1.5 to 2 years to complete. The hope is to have all 4 lakes developing plans concurrently. Kurt reemphasized Frank's request for members to provide input on the plan, since this committee and the associated organizations committee members represent have a lot of collective experience and insight into Lake Huron and can provide varied perspectives.

Committee members were asked to provide initial comments on the proposed planning effort:

Ed Retherford

Ed mentioned the fact that many anglers are not satisfied with the quality of fishing in Lake Huron. He argued that anglers should diversify their angling strategies to take advantage of what the changing lake may offer. If anglers don't change, their success will be limited. Brown trout stocking has been less than successful and may have outlived its usefulness. Atlantics and steelhead are doing fairly well, and Ed wondered why brown trout aren't doing as well those species? Why can't we fish lake trout through the ice? Ed also emphasized the need to recognize that the southern lake is different from the north, so each area should generate different expectations.

Larry Desloover

Fisheries Division is losing a lot of money. Perch fishing has declined so the once significant shore fishing element has been largely lost, with this family, youth oriented aspect lost to a great degree.

Jim DeClerck

Jim mentioned the recent NRC meeting and the Au Sable regulations discussion. Jim is not a large fan of stocking, unless to kick start a fishery. For walleye, we shouldn't stock when analysis shows it is not an economically sound investment. We should take advantage of natural recruitment when we can.

Ron Ramsey

Ron talked about organizing the Cheboygan Sportfishing group, and the subsequent salmon stocking that is creating a good fishery. People had been complaining about lack of salmon, now they have adapted to the changed fishery, and are now catching better numbers of lake trout and Atlantic salmon. He would like to improve the Atlantic fishery, and asked how we could do this?

Tom Hamilton

Tom is from the Lake Michigan side, Montague area, and will likely have more questions later. Tom learned from Lake Huron walleye anglers, and hopes that Lake Michigan anglers can continue to learn from Lake Huron anglers and gain greater appreciation for lake trout as well. He talked about the parallel between Lake Huron Atlantics and Lake Michigan Skamania. He also talked about the origin of the recent success of the walleye program. Tom also identified the differences in fishing north vs south is also present on Lake Michigan.

Paul Wendler

Paul mentioned that he has lived through a long history of Lake Huron management. He has concerns about exotics, lower salmon levels, and lack of forage. What will the new emphasis for fisheries management be with the new conditions? Kurt responded that the subject plan will help answer Paul's questions and provide direction for the future management of the lake. The advisory committees are critical to providing input on direction for the plan. This group should help provide the emphasis Paul asked for, and set the strategic course. The Fisheries Division is asking for feedback to develop the vision and revise as necessary, because the lake is likely to continue to change.

Clarence Smith

Clarence asked if his group would be able to operate their walleye pond this year? Kurt explained the Division's criteria for choosing which ponds we will be able to operate due to vhs concerns. The pond Clarence is concerned with will most likely not qualify for production this year. Hopefully, development of effective egg disinfection techniques, expansion of walleye production will follow. The Division made forward steps last year to increase production, and will continue to make steps as appropriate and prudent. Clarence also asked about ability to shoot cormorants on Charity Islands. Jim Baker, Dave Borgeson, Kurt, and Dave Fielder explained the process involving the department committee and setting priorities. Clarence also says that 12 whitefish creel limit are too many.

Phil Babe

Would like to see nearshore smelt fishery come back, and also like to see ability to keep lake trout. The reef is now producing a good walleye fishery.

Jim Johnson

Is anxious to see what this group recommends. Jim indicated that the DNR Fisheries Division Lake Huron Basin Team has started discussions concerning the plan development process.

Gene Raymond

Gene described some of his Lake Huron fishing experiences throughout his life, including catching a very lonely lake trout during the Korean War. We have had great times, and should have good times to come. Perch fishing had tanked, but now with cormorant control they have been coming back in the Les Cheneaux area. Gene showed a picture of the stomach contents of a cormorant, which contained several perch. Gene asked if a 50 perch limit is appropriate? He talked about the very large perch that anglers used to take, and described their activities as sometimes being “greedy.” Gene explained that LSSU has a limited capacity for Atlantic production. He also believes that cormorants contributed to lack of success of Carp River stocking of Atlantics. He would like to see more rivers stocked to try to get natural production kicked in. The Straits Area Sportsmen contributed \$15,000 to the cormorant control effort.

Bill Becks

Bill was concerned about the change of splake regulations in the Les Cheneaux area. The new regulations preclude the once popular winter fishery and the early ice out fishery.

Ken Merckel

Ken argued that we need to know the capacity of the hatcheries; what they can produce, and what size of fish they can produce in order to have a good idea of what limitations exist for the plan. Maybe we should have an in-house review of the hatchery system. Ken believes we also need to know what fish can take advantage of the current food sources, notably gobies. All of us are provincial; we want to have our favorite fish to fish for. Ken believes that walleye have become the main predator, probably reducing alewife and the amount of perch available to anglers. Lake trout are a staple for fishing off the Thumb, but are stocked on top of reefs loaded with large lake trout which eat the newly stocked fish. He would like to see more Atlantics and steelhead, but wonders about our capability to produce them. Ken would like to see a plan that addresses the lake as a whole and not just the provincial desires of anglers. He is worried that planning is difficult when the lake changes quickly, and he wondered if we can have a plan that is agile enough to adjust as quickly the lake changes. Ken noted that there are walleye everywhere up and down the coast. Ken likes fishing walleye, but would like to be able to successfully fish for salmon as well.

Dave Fielder

Dave believes stakeholder contribution is critical, but management options must be based in sound science. Dave cautioned folks against just focusing on the management tools that committee members believe we should implement, and focus more on the direction we need to go.

Tom Keerl

The lake is changing far too fast, and if we don't get a handle on invasive species, we will always be behind the curve in adjusting our management strategies. Without some stability it will be very difficult to predict what will happen, hindering our ability to plan effectively. The management plan needs to try to provide the greatest opportunity to the greatest number of

anglers. We are losing anglers. Tom believes that the development of a quality shore angling experience is probably the best way to increase angling participation, and we need to think beyond just the big boat fishing needs. Frank noted that some shore angling opportunities do exist, and educating people may be a way to help increase participation. Tom also said smallmouth bass are also an opportunity for anglers to utilize in many areas.

Captain Ron Beyer

Fishing was very difficult in the Harrisville area this year, and even lake trout are becoming scarce. It is hard to get lake trout to come inshore for easier access to anglers. Perhaps nearshore stocking might make them more available to more anglers. The salmon run in harbor was not very good. Ron noted the difficulties when different species are present nearshore at the same time (less than sporting anglers conflicting with law abiding anglers). Charters are down, and he is the only charter left in Harrisville. He doesn't know what the answer is, but is wondering if the investment in stocking salmon is worthwhile.

Forrest Williams

Forrest would like to see a commercial fishing section included in the plan. The main species taken by the commercial fishery is whitefish, and the commercial fishing industry continues providing economic benefits to the state. They don't have the luxury to move operations quickly to adjust to changing conditions. The commercial fishery has provided a lot of research information to the state over the years, and any decline in commercial operations may jeopardize these information collection opportunities. Forrest explained that their operation has a history in raising perch to commercial size, and that expertise could be useful in the future. Tribal fisherman and Canadians are taking a lot of fish that could otherwise be available to Michigan. Forrest is concerned about the ramifications of the lake herring project. They have seen a few herring every year, and if conditions were good for them, why haven't they taken off on their own.

Fred Sterns

Fred fishes out of Rockport and has had good spring fishing for steelhead and Atlantics nearshore. Also, walleye and chinook fishing has been pretty good in the same area during the summer in about 35 feet of water.

Frank Krist

Frank was provided comments by Judy Ogden. She would like to see more nearshore angling opportunities, especially for children. Why can Lake Erie support such a great steelhead fishery? Could Lake Huron provide a home for more steelhead?

Kurt Newman

Kurt mentioned that without the fiscal capability, we may not be able to implement components of the plan. By the end of this year, we may be looking at a \$10 million dollar deficit. In 2010, the fiscal situation will be much worse and could result in program cuts. Kurt urged committee members to take this message home to their groups. We need to get something done quickly to get us through the short term, and a long term solution is needed as well. Jim DeClerck stated that the legislature needs to realize the economic benefit to the state of well managed natural resources. Tom Keerl and Frank agreed that long term funding is needed.

Frank said that Brandon Schroeder could not make it, and Frank provided some of Brandon's thoughts. There are workshops coming up on the Lake Michigan side soon, and we should be gathering some information and input from stakeholders at the upcoming Lake Huron workshops. Ken asked if anyone is available at MSU to determine how much economic benefit is generated by management actions. Frank and Kurt said that there is information already available. Jim DeClerck said that this information is a gross underestimate of the true value provided by natural resource management. To accurately quantify this would require a lot of effort and might be difficult to accurately quantify.

Frank relayed the dates for the upcoming workshops.

Tom Hamilton stressed that all organizations should be sure to maintain their integrity by being honest with their members and the DNR. The DNR will bend over backwards to help them be successful.

Lunch was provided by RAM Center staff

Minutes were approved from the November meeting.

Paul Wendler

We live in a changing world, there are a lot of challenges, but he has confidence in the leadership in the DNR to adequately navigate through these times.

Kurt Newman

Kurt reiterated the financial difficulties facing the DNR, especially the situation forecasted in 2010, and the consequences likely to result. He again urged committee members to relay this to their contacts. Kurt mentioned the beginning of a marketing effort for the DNR, with an internal committee headed by the Director, Becky Humphrey. The DNR aren't generally experts in this, and we recognize this, but hopefully we can get the expertise in place to assist the effort. This effort is needed to let people know the overall impact of natural resource management on the State of Michigan.

There is a new law chief. Those present who have dealt with him, had good things to say about their dealings with him.

Kurt relayed the recent effort to identify projects that might qualify for an economic stimulus package that could be coming with the new administration.

Dr. Steve Hewett, recently from Wisconsin, will be Kurt's replacement as the Lake Erie Basin Coordinator. Todd Kalish will be the Central Lake Michigan Unit Manager, leaving a hole in the Eastern Lake Superior Management Unit.

DNR Unit updates

Dave Borgeson and Jim Baker provided updates for their units.

Miscellaneous topics

Ken Merckel reported suspicious boating activity in Lake Huron, and would like to know what boats are present, and who is operating them. He believes much of this activity is Canadian. Ken asked how to get more information about this activity. Kurt and Larry suggested through the enforcement committee. Ken will get with Larry on this subject.

Phil Babe asked about the increase in tapeworms seen in walleye. Jim Baker said this increase is due to change in the walleye diet. Jim explained the life cycle of the tapeworm and how the shift in diet, considering the life cycle, could result in increasing incidences of tapeworm occurrence in walleye.

Frank asked about the existence of an Asian tapeworm. Jim Baker said that the article Frank is referring to may have had some inaccuracies, leading to a mistaken idea that the walleye tapeworm is of Asian origin. Tom Hamilton said that some clarification is needed to assist in getting the proper information to the public.

Jim Johnson said that the fall bottom trawl survey was not completed this year. The LHTC meeting will discuss this on January 20th. These data are important to accurately describe the condition of the lake. Committee members asked what they could do to ensure this information is collected. Perhaps a letter from the committee to the USGS Great Lakes Science Center Director and having the program supervisor attend a LHCFAC meeting would be appropriate.

Rainbow and Atlantic potential in Lake Huron (Jim Johnson)

Jim asked Kurt how Lake Erie supported such a good steelhead fishery. Kurt said many agencies have stocked a lot of steelhead, around 1.4 million, and these fish have taken advantage of available forage opportunities. There is some natural reproduction as well that contributes to the fishery.

Jim then gave his presentation. He showed the recent failure of the brown trout fishery, and described the change in management to stocking fall yearlings designed to avoid heavy spring predation on the newly stocked brown trout.

He then showed that rainbow returns to the creel have not been impressive either. Jim offered some potential actions to improve contribution to the creel: increase hatchery capacity, cormorant hazing and management, stocking windows, removing barriers, and acclimation pens.

Atlantic Salmon have fared better than other salmonids under current conditions in Lake Huron. They are a unique fish well suited to the St. Marys River and the LSSU rearing facility. Ability to effectively stock in other locations may be problematic. Further investigation into the potential to expand the Atlantic stocking program was supported by the committee.

Cisco (Lake Herring) Pilot Study, Federal Herring Proposal (Dave Fielder)

Dave presented the historic and recent cisco abundance information for Lake Huron, and possible reasons for the decline. Current lake conditions (absence of alewife, sea lamprey control, invertebrate community) may offer chance for expansion of the cisco population.

Dave explained the potential scenario that would allow for reestablishment of cisco populations in Thunder Bay and Saginaw Bay, at least to some degree. Discussion ensued on how lake conditions might inhibit or promote cisco population increases. Dave also outlined the federal proposal to expand hatchery facilities to promote cisco rearing, and the committee said the likelihood of this happening in the current fiscal and political environment is low.

Schedule meeting dates for 2009 and the member's database (Frank Krist)

April 4th (Bad Axe) and 18th (Alpena) are Brandon's suggestions for the fishing workshops hosted by Sea Grant. Frank and Kurt believed that April 1st would work well for the spring meeting, for many reasons. **Upcoming meetings were agreed to be held on: April 1st, June 24th (see note below), and November 4th.**

Note: because the RAM Center was not available, the June 24th meeting date was changed to June 25, 2009.

3:00 Meeting adjourned