



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

Minutes

August 19, 2008

RAM Conference Center

10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Approved November 5, 2008

Attendees: Paul Wendler, Forrest Williams, Todd Williams, Frank Krist, Ken Merckel, Jim DeClerck, Ron Ramsey, Ed Retherford, Andy Pelt, Clarence Smith, Bill Jenkins, Judy Ogden, Jerry Lawrence, Dave Johnson, Jim Baker, Jim Johnson, Dave Borgeson, Larry DeSloover, Kurt Newman.

10:00 Welcome and introductions (Paul Wendler):

Paul Wendler called the meeting to order asking for any additional agenda items. Paul then announced he was retiring as chairman of the Advisory Committee. He was proud of the committee and its independent and free thinking nature, and the manner in which it represented the various constituencies of Lake Huron. Paul said that he would run today's meeting, and proposed that after lunch the committee should elect a new chairman, with Frank Krist receiving Paul's recommendation.

Kurt Newman then introduced himself and described his background. Kurt earned his undergraduate degree from Michigan State University, a master's degree at Virginia Tech University, and returned to MSU for his PhD. Kurt joined the DNR in 1998 working on tribal related issues. Kurt then headed up the Habitat Management Unit in the MDNR Fisheries, working heavily in the hydropower negotiation process. Kurt then became the Lake Erie Basin Coordinator in 2002, resulting in his deep involvement in all things Great Lakes (core member of Great Lakes Fisheries Commission Board of Technical Experts, core member of Sea Lamprey Integration Committee, etc.).

Kurt worked with the Lake Erie Citizen's Fishery Advisory Committee to help them become a more active and effective group, and looks forward to working with this group. Kurt suggested that perhaps the chairmen of all the advisory groups could get together to discuss common issues, and that common terms of reference should be developed across all various Lake Advisory Committees. He then invited discussion and comments from the group.

Stakeholder roundtable:

Paul asked committee members to introduce themselves and give the group a short update of their activities or observation.

Forrest Williams, Bayport Fish Company, said whitefish catch is down but the price is up. The market for catfish is down, with VHS concerns eliminating cross-state transport of live fish and Chinese fish on the market indicated as prime factors in the decline. Whitefish condition appears to be improving. Forrest said that he welcomes an opportunity to compete with the tribes on a more level playing field, with state licensed operations allowed to fish at deeper depths.

Ron Ramsey, Cheboygan Area Sportsmen, said that the chinook he has seen seems to be good shape, and fishing has been decent. Lots of smelt and baitfish have been seen in stomachs. More Atlantics have been caught this year. Tournament entrants were down this year. Fishing prior to tournament was good, but catch rates for the tournament were down.

Ken Merckel, vice president of Thumb Steelheaders, said he just returned from a trip to Ontario to fish for salmon. Ken has mostly been fishing for walleye this year.

Ed Retherford, Northeast Michigan Walleye Association and charter captain, mentioned his assistance in cormorant control efforts. The weather has been tough on fishing this year. He has been seeing lots of Atlantics which are evidently eating gobies, and has also been seeing good numbers of steelhead. Smelt have been common in stomachs.

Jim DeClerk, Saginaw Field and Stream Club, introduced himself and briefly explained the history of his club and the fact that it is the largest one of its kind in the state.

Andy Pelt, Steelheaders, talked about the proposed 3 rod and 5 salmon rules and the positive response they received from the NRC Commissioners. He thought this group should give a recommendation on the proposals.

Clarence Smith (chairman) and Bill Jenkins of Walleyes for Iosco County introduced themselves, saying that fishing has been spotty this year and they have been seeing a lot of weeds in the bay. They also mentioned that Phil Babe wanted an expanded season for lake trout.

Jerry Lawrence, Thumb Area Steelheaders, stated that they have lost many charter boat operations, and some marinas have closed. Fishing effort is way down. A few steelhead are being caught off Harbor Beach, and a few chinook were caught in the spring. They worked with Detroit Edison and the Fish and Wildlife Service to get better docking at Harbor Beach. Project was finished by May 5th and the Baird was able to dock on May 10th, tying up to the new pilings. Walleye fishing started good in the Bay and he has followed them around to Port Hope. He has done really well on walleye this year. The walleye fishing has slowed down since the lake turned over.

Judy Ogden, Bluewater Sport Fishing Association, said club membership has dropped from approximately 450 to 325. Most of their membership no longer fishes Lake Huron. They have been fishing Lake St. Clair (for walleye), Lake Erie (outstanding steelhead fishing), as well as Lake Ontario and Lake Michigan for chinook. For Lake Huron, perch fishing has been inconsistent. Summer fishing has been poor at Lexington and Port Sanilac. Lots of shiners and smelt are available as prey. Bait dealers have been netting smelt. Chinook that they caught were in 50 ft of water down 22 feet, with coho available as well. These fish are not frequenting the traditional depths and temperatures. Weather has been a problem this year.

Frank Krist, Hammond Bay Anglers, briefly talked about their efforts involving the inland and Great Lakes consent decrees. Frank said fishing has been twice as good as last year. Chinook

condition is better with most fish around 8-10 pounds, with some larger ones available. These fish were eating 3 to 4 inch smelt. Lake trout have been eating gobies, smelt, other lake trout, as well as stocked chinook in the spring.

Paul Wendler then talked about his background and activity in: Saginaw Field and Stream Club, MUCC presidency, and the National Wildlife Federation. Paul talked about his involvement with the first negotiation process with the tribes. He noted some difficulties with the original draft agreement which were later addressed. Paul then discussed some of the major problems facing us; exotics and the difficult budgetary conditions within the DNR. Kurt was welcomed to Lake Huron by Paul.

Kurt talked briefly about the differences between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, and his past experiences in the Lake Huron basin, growing up fishing in the Lake Huron basin. He talked about the excellent walleye fishery in Saginaw Bay. Kurt emphasized that he wants input from the committee members, including the assessment of the fishery that just occurred.

LHCFAC Terms of reference

Frank Krist passed along some suggested guidelines for how the committee should operate. Frank asked if we should have a more formalized set of rules to operate under. Do we maximize members? How do we appoint members? What do we do with members who don't show up? Should decisions be consensus based? These are only a few of the questions we might want to answer. Ed said there are a lot of stakeholders out there, with a lot of different interests, and he is not sure all appropriate issues are being discussed. Forrest Williams suggested that perhaps there should be alternates appointed for each member, and the guidelines should reflect the committee's working relationship with the DNR. Frank agreed, saying that we have been basing decisions on biology. Ken said that the member list should reflect who has been participating. Frank agreed that the list should be updated by the chair and basin coordinator yearly. Ken wants to see a plan for action in Lake Huron: where do we go from here? Ken also said that if a member doesn't attend for a specified period of time, they should no longer be a member.

Jim Johnson looked at the Lake Huron Technical Committee as a possible model; with members, guests, and resource people identified separately.

Jim DeClerck likes how the meetings have been operated in the past, without too rigid a structure. Jim wants the committee to have productive members, not just those who want to blow off steam. Jim believes Lake Huron is over-regulated. He also wants to improve the food base, or find out how can we better exploit what is out there now. Kurt said that the forage base is largely out of our control, but dealing with what is available and how we should best manage with the resources available is definitely worthy of discussion and input from this group. **Lake Michigan has been developing a planning document; perhaps that is a direction we could take?** A vision document, or one that is more strategic in nature, might be appropriate.

Jim Johnson discussed some of what the DNR has been doing relative to Jim DeClerck's suggestion, with the cormorant reduction efforts and lake herring pilot project. Jim D. would like to hear more of this type of activity.

Ken Merckel believes we are too restrictive in moving fish between lakes, and cited a discussion with Mark Ebener supporting him. He suggested a more common sense approach in regard to all the restrictions imposed on fish rearing and stocking. Ken mentioned that Rep. Dingell has a bill in congress to expand federal hatchery system which may accommodate lake herring rearing.

Kurt stated that we are in the infancy of developing a vision statement, so a lot of input from this group should be forthcoming. Kurt agreed that looking at regulations from a common sense perspective is not a bad idea, but common sense also involves adequately protecting our resources.

Jim DeClerck said that a vision statement never put a fish in the lake. Identified problems should come before this group, and we should address them as needed. Kurt suggested that we often need to be a little more proactive, and with a common document available for distribution, we may be able to gain the support we need in a timely manner.

Forrest asked how the proposed document would be different from the Fish Community Objectives. Kurt said the document would have to be compatible with the FCO's, but would be specific to how we would work within that framework to manage the resource for Michigan stakeholders.

Ken wondered if the GLFC has too much power, and also wondered if dollars are being spent effectively, citing the long term lamprey pheromone research and lack of an associated effective management product. Kurt reminded that group that the bulk of the GLFC's budget still goes to lamprey control.

Jim Johnson doesn't see the FCO's to be too constraining for our management. The GLFC provides an excellent framework for collaboration and joint discussion and research efforts.

Paul expressed his concerns, reminding members of the advisory nature of the group.

Judy said that one of the functions of the Advisory Committee is to push the DNR to be risk takers, because their stakeholders want to catch fish in the short term. She wants to help fight institutional malaise that is sometimes endemic to large organizations and thwarts risk taking. Kurt relayed to the group the direction the DNR is taking in stakeholder involvement, and how the DNR is using the LHCFAC as a model for stakeholder involvement.

Kurt asked if group was still supportive of the spring workshops. Brandon said SeaGrant would be willing to sponsor and asked if April 11th or April 18th would work for 2009. Jim Johnson described how this group normally meets just prior to the stakeholder meeting to go over the agenda and presentation content. Judy expressed her support of the workshops. **The committee supported continuation of the workshops on the dates suggested.**

Chairmanship of LHCFAC

Ken Merkel nominated Frank Krist for chairman, Judy Ogden seconded the nomination. The committee agreed with the nomination, and Frank Krist is the new chairman of the LHCFAC. Frank thanked Paul for his work chairing the committee, emphasizing Paul's support for members speaking up without regard for the popularity of their viewpoint.

Management and Research Unit Updates: **Southern Lake Huron Management Unit**

Jim Baker said that walleye fishing has been very good, while chinook fishing has not been so good. Jim handed out a list of their unit's walleye production and stocking efforts, detailing the difficulties the timing of receiving walleye caused on the production end.

Jim talked about the progress toward construction of Singing Bridge access. Jim also mentioned the Whitney Drain project. Whitney Drain will be modified to act more like a stream and alleviate

erosion problems, which will also help facilitate providing a better access site. Jim talked about the new fish consumption advisory and the changes in recommendations on consumption of walleye. This specifically targets walleye over 18 inches and the potential impacts on pregnant women, women of childbearing years, and children. Co-planer PCBs are the chemicals of concern, along with dioxin. Jim's unit will be collecting more walleye to see if this advisory is appropriate. Bill asked if walleye rearing would be ramped up soon. Kurt talked about impacts to a hatchery if VHS was introduced. Bill talked about implications to his group's donations for pond management.

Northern Lake Huron Management Unit

Dave Borgeson listed a number of activities taking place in Fisheries Division's NLHMU. Dave indicated a number of cormorant harassment and control activities are under way in the unit, including: Les Cheneaux Islands, Thunder Bay, Au Sable River, and Drummond Island. Dave mentioned the walleye stocking program within the unit, with some lakes identified as lower risk lakes being stocked through cooperative efforts among the DNR fisheries units. A cooperative effort with the Sault tribe resulted in a significant stocking of walleye in the St. Marys River. Additional projects include: Black River sturgeon tagging, rainbow trout strain study, numerous lake and stream surveys, Van Etten Dam engineering project, and resumption of the habitat restoration effort on the Au Sable River.

Alpena Fisheries Research Station

Jim Johnson then presented the update for the Alpena Fisheries Research Station. Jim presented the results the spring index netting in Thunder Bay. Only one alewife was caught this year; the lowest catch ever. Walleye catch rates were up significantly in Thunder Bay. 6000 lake herring were stocked in Thunder Bay this year, with the program continuing this fall with an expanded egg collection planned. Chinook vertebrae collections resumed this year, with less than 100 obtained. North of Alpena, chinooks were available, but collection rates in the south were still poor. Scarecrow Island no longer has cormorants, for the second year. In the past, this was the largest rookery. Lake trout catch rates, especially the small ones, declined in the south. This survey will resume with a lot of effort expended to try to determine if this decline is real. They are seeing a lot of walleyes in their nets, even out to 100 feet of water, which is a lot of space to see this many walleye.

Jim then talked about the LHTC meeting a Lovells, and in particular the discussion surrounding lake trout harvest policy. We have modeled the lake trout population for all of Lake Huron, and are concerned about the numbers of lake trout harvested from southern Lake Huron. Estimation of Ontario's portion of the harvest has increased greatly, based in large part in changing commercial (gill net fishery) reporting procedures. Jim also described problems with the model's assumption of 60% survival of stocked fish. It is likely that this number is much too large, especially considering the declining growth rate for lake trout. With this disproportionate allocation (Ontario stocking 1/5 of fish, but harvesting over 70%), the committee discussed if it would be appropriate for changes take place in the near future? Bottom line is that we need to have better parameter estimates in order to make a better case that mortality is out of line.

Three rods, 5 salmon bag limit issues (Kurt Newman):

Both issues were brought before the NRC for information. There was a lot of support among constituent groups. The 5 salmon bag limit can be approved at the next NRC meeting, but the 3 rod proposal will take an act of legislation to put in place. The 3 rod proposal would be for all anglers, not just trout and salmon.

Call for agenda items (Frank Krist):

Frank suggested a different process for developing the agendas. He emphasized the need for members to get agenda items to the chair, and stressed that he is available by phone to discuss any potential items.

Next meeting: Scheduled for November 5th.

Be prepared for developing next year's schedule.

Kurt suggested that members consider identifying an alternate who could represent their group at the Advisory Committee.

Meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m.