



## 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' Fisheries Advisory Committee (LHCFAC) Meeting Ralph A. MacMullan Conference Center June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

#### **Minutes**

**Attendees:** Gene Kirvan, Bill Leichtman, Andy Pelt, Jim DeClerck, Judy Ogden, Ken Merckel, Tom Hamilton, Gene Raymond, William Becks, Jim Johnson, Roger Greil, Dave Borgeson, Jim Baker, Forrest Williams, Bud Donnelly, Terry Lyons, Linn Duling, Ron Ramsey, Brandon Schroeder, Ji He, Scott Miehl, Craig Milkowski, Larry Desloover, Howard Tanner, Jeff Schaeffer, Kurt Newman and Frank Krist

#### **Overview of Atlantic salmon rearing program at Lake Superior State University:**

Mr. Roger Greil presented an overview of the Lake Superior State University (LSSU) rearing program, which began in 1985 and releases 25,000 to 40,000 Atlantic salmon (atlantics) yearlings annually. Atlantics are very sensitive to sudden changes in their environment (food, water temperature, etc.) but acclimate well if changes are made slowly and gradually. They do not do well in crowded conditions, and do best at raceway loadings of 30 kg/ cubic meter while most other salmonids can be raised at up to 80 kg/cubic meter. Adult atlantics are collected with constantly tended gill nets from the St. Mary's River at the Aquatic Research Laboratory (ARL). Adult males and females have to be segregated while being held or they hurt each other. Adults are held no longer than three weeks for ripening before eggs are taken. All pairings are tested for Bacterial Kidney Disease (BKD), and eggs from parents testing positive are discarded. Atlantics reared at LSSU are Grand Lake strain, originally obtained from the state of Maine, but they have been able to take all of their own eggs since 2005. Eggs are taken in November, and hatch in May of the next year. Early Mortality Syndrome (EMS) is a problem but they deal with it by treating the fry with a thiamine bath. Roger provided detailed information regarding incubation, preferred water temperatures, food, etc. All changes of food, water temperature, etc. must be made gradually to avoid putting undue stress on the fish. Also, they are very sensitive to supersaturation of nitrogen and all rearing water must be aggressively de-gassed. Covered raceways are critical for controlling several factors including avian predation. The fingerlings actually smolt the fall before they are planted, but by then LSSU has them on ambient temperature river water and holds them through the winter at 1-degree Centigrade which apparently stops or significantly slows growth until spring. The fish are planted out as yearlings in June of their second year at 7 to 8-inches long, when water temperatures rise to 8-degrees Centigrade. The yearlings are not trucked anywhere; they are flushed directly into the St. Mary's River from the ARL.

Adult atlantics return to the St. Mary's River beginning in mid-June. Two year old fish range in size from 15 to 25-inches long and average about 2.5-pounds; three year old fish range from 24 to 36-inches and can range in weight from 8 to 18-pounds. Four and five year old fish are slow growing and usually are smaller than three year olds. Returns to creel are better since cormorant control programs commenced in the area. Most of the atlantics seem to stay in the northern part of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, although they are also caught as far south as Lexington on occasion.

Roger outlined fishing techniques for atlantics and recommended trolling off Detour from late May until mid-July. The fish are in the river and active from mid-June through mid-July and can be taken there by boat and from shore as well.

Roger responded to several questions from committee members. Cost of heating water could be significant; LSSU gets its power free from Soo Edison, but it would amount to about \$45,000 per year if they had to buy it. This is only to heat water for the eggs and fry. The fish may not do well if kept at a constant water temperature year round. Roger believes the ice-cold waters of the St. Mary's in winter suppress bacterial growth and thereby promotes fish health. If MDNR is to attempt rearing atlantics, the division will have to select a hatchery where winter water temperatures can be adjusted to mimic conditions at ARL. Atlantic salmon living in the Great Lakes don't grow as large as sea-run atlantics because they mature and run at younger ages and probably have a less diverse and nutritious diet.

Based on his experience at LSSU, Roger believes it would take MDNR a minimum of 10-years to develop an Atlantic salmon program capable of producing appreciable creel returns. Kelley Smith pointed out that MDNR abandoned Atlantic salmon culture in the 1980's because stakeholders became impatient with the lack of success of the program.

Kurt Newman reported that Gary Whelan, MDNR's Fish Production (Hatcheries) Manager, will attend the November 4 Advisory Committee meeting to further discuss the possibility of a pilot project to raise Atlantic salmon.

**Update on Atlantic salmon feasibility project:**

Scott Miehl, Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) Program Associate, based in Ann Arbor and Anna Kilbourn, recently graduated Bachelor of Science student from the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University (MSU) based in East Lansing have volunteered to conduct a comprehensive review of the scientific literature on Atlantic salmon to determine, to the extent possible, the feasibility of rearing Atlantic salmon at production levels in a MDNR hatchery and whether atlantics will fit into the Lake Huron fish community and ecosystem.

The specific goals of this project are to 1) summarize current information on Atlantic salmon life history and rehabilitation efforts in other locations; 2) document the history of Atlantic salmon propagation in Michigan and other relevant experiences; and, 3) evaluate the feasibility of stocking Atlantic salmon lakewide in Lake Huron under the current biological conditions.

The anticipated products from their work include a whitepaper for publication in MDNR's Fisheries Special Publications series and/or a published journal article; an annotated bibliography; a presentation to MDNR Fisheries Division basin teams; a presentation to the Lake Huron Citizens Fisheries Advisory Committee; and, possibly a presentation at a professional fisheries meeting/conference.

In terms of process, Scott and Anna will utilize available library resources at MSU, the University of Michigan (UM), and Fisheries Division (FD); they will conduct interviews with FD hatchery, research, and management field staff as needed; they will mine FD files and databases; and, provide regular updates on progress to the FD Research Program Manager.

The projected timeline for completing the project is flexible, but the FD Research Program Manager and Lake Huron Basin Coordinator have targeted September for receiving a draft paper.

Members of the LHCFAC expressed varying levels of impatience with the pace of MDNR's evaluation of an Atlantic salmon program for Lake Huron. Kurt stressed the need for due diligence and adhering to appropriate process given the current fiscal realities FD faces before expending limited resources on a pilot rearing project at an MDNR hatchery. He pointed out this was especially true given current experience at LSSU and past experience within FD suggests benefits of an Atlantic salmon program, if successful, would not likely accrue to anglers in less than 10-years. Kurt suggested the first step would be to review results of the Atlantic salmon feasibility project. If those results provide a reasonable foundation for proceeding, that the LHCFAC, with sponsorship from staff at the Alpena Fisheries Research Station, draft a proposal to conduct a pilot study and submit that to the Lake Huron Basin Team (LHBT) for consideration this fall. In the event results of the feasibility project are not yet available, the LHCFAC could still draft a proposal for consideration by the LHBT this fall, presenting alternative rationale for moving forward with a pilot project.

#### **Cisco Pilot Study Update:**

Jim Johnson reported that Dave Fielder (Research Section), with Neal Godby (Field Operations) and Matt Hughes (Fish Production), are drafting the final report detailing results of the pilot study. It is anticipated the draft report will be finished by August or September. Approximately 40,000 ciscoes produced in the study will be stocked at 5 to 6-inches long in July. At this time, MDNR does not anticipate continuing cisco egg takes in 2009, but the FD Management Team may reconsider that position after reviewing the results and recommendations of the Cisco Pilot Study Report.

Jim Johnson reported that EPA has a great interest in native species restoration and may get Economic Stimulus funds to start a cisco program utilizing federal fish hatcheries. Jim also stated that Jordan River Federal Fish Hatchery has received a federal stimulus grant to update their facilities. Kelley Smith stated that MDNR is getting no federal stimulus dollars.

Ken Merckel has been in contact with the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, which has been raising cisco produced from Lake Superior broodstock in a different pilot study project. They may be able to produce surplus fish for Lake Huron if biosecurity concerns regarding moving the fish can be satisfied. Ken will coordinate with Kurt and Martha Wolgamood (Fish Disease Coordinator at Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery) to see what can be done regarding satisfying biosecurity in order to secure any available surplus cisco fingerlings.

#### **Chief's Update:**

Kelley believes he has spoken to more than 800 people regarding the fish Division's budget plight and has asked for input concerning how to prioritize Fisheries programs as the budget continues to erode. To date, he has received no input whatsoever. Fish Division's budget cut in FY 2010 will be at least \$3 million. The Lieutenant Governor is evaluating all state departments with the intent of combining departments and reducing state government to seven core functions (Public Safety; Education; Public Systems; Well-being; Sustainability; Economic Opportunity and Prosperity; and, Efficiency and Effectiveness). Fisheries Division could potentially reside in a newly formed Department of Sustainability. The state house and senate have combined the DNR and DEQ budgets for next year.

And, there is a bill in the state house to move the Forest Management Division to the Department of Agriculture.

The reorganization of inland trout stream regulations is at a standstill due to opposition from fly fishing groups and Trout Unlimited. It's unlikely any regulation changes related to inland trout streams will make it into the 2010 Fishing Guide. A change in the lake trout bag limit for Lake Superior, moving from three to five fish per day, is being considered.

Judy Ogden asked for more information concerning how Fisheries Division will adjust the budget in 2010. Kelley stated that the boilerplate prohibiting cutting hatcheries had been put into DNR's budget bill, so all the cuts would have to come from Field Operations and Research. Most attrition (retirements) is happening randomly in Field Operations, and some units are badly understaffed with no hope of reinforcement. Due to recent retirements and transfers, there are only one unit manager and two biologists left in the entire Upper Peninsula.

### **Update on Predator Diet Study**

Jeff Schaeffer reported that USGS, working in cooperation with various fishing clubs and tournaments, has accumulated a very good sample size (number of fish stomachs donated by anglers) with good spatial and temporal representation. A great deal of cannibalism in lake trout (adult lakers eating newly planted juvenile lake trout) was noted at the Port Austin tournament last weekend. The study will need to follow the fishing north up the lake as the summer progresses. They are in process of making contacts at Cheboygan. Jeff and Ed Roseman have been attending tournaments on many recent weekends. MDNR creel clerks have also been contributing good numbers of stomachs.

### **Sea Grant Fisheries Workshops**

Brandon Schroeder reported that the workshops in April at Bad Axe and Alpena were well attended, with about 45 anglers in attendance at each. A lot of good feedback was received. Brandon would like to begin scoping the 2010 Fishery Workshops at the November Advisory Committee meeting.

### **Lake Trout Informational Handouts**

Ji He passed out three packets of information regarding lake trout biology in Lake Huron. Frank Krist asked the committee members to review the materials and provide suggestions to make the information more readable for the general public.

### **Howard Tanner's Comments:**

Dr. Tanner pointed out that when he took over the Fisheries Division in 1964, it had 200 to 220 employees and all were devoted to managing inland fisheries; there was no management of the Great Lakes. Fast forward to 2009, and the Fisheries Division has less than 200 employees and is expected to manage both the Great Lakes and inland waters. Michigan's Fisheries Division manages more acres of water than the fisheries divisions of all the other 49 states combined. Anglers and hunters need to emphasize the economic impacts of their activities to lawmakers to secure adequate funding. The Great Lakes are 'Blue Soil'. Fishing groups need to work with the MDNR to strengthen it.

### **LHCFAC Subcommittee or Steering Committee?**

Should there be one, to provide initial review of projects ideas and meeting topics? Anyone interested in being on a Steering Committee should drop Frank an e-mail.

### **Lakewide Management Plan:**

Discussion of this topic included; how to structure the plan, how to roll it out to the public, and development of a time-line for completion. Kurt stated that we should draw on existing Great Lakes Fishery Commission documents including the Fish Community Objectives and the most recent State of the Lake Report. There was sentiment that the management plans for all four Great Lakes should follow the same or a similar format. There were questions concerning the nature of the format; would it be by species, or by species complex? Many wanted the plan to be a 'living document', to be update as changing conditions dictate. Kurt suggested the FD Basin Coordinators could develop a draft format for review by the lake advisory committees. It would be best to have the MDNR plan finished before the Great Lakes Fishery Commission reviews the Fish Community Objectives again (which will be about five years hence).

### **Development and Approval of New Research Projects**

Jim Johnson provided a handout of FD's *Policy & Procedure for Prioritization of Research Needs and Annual Selection of Research Study Proposals and Renewals* and a synopsis of how such selections are made. Kurt stated that there are lots of checks and balances built into this system, and we follow the time-lines outlined therein so as to match Department of Management and Budget (DMB) timelines for funding and starting new studies. It's about 16-months from start to finish on the whole process.

### **Winter Lake Trout Season and Splake Season in the Les Cheneaux Islands**

Dave Borgeson discussed the situation regarding establishment of a winter splake season in the Les Cheneaux's; because it falls in the 1836 Tribal Zone, there will have to be review of the proposal by the Tribal Fisheries Council (TFC) before any action is taken. The TFC's next meeting is in October. Kurt reminded the group that Michigan has to be diligent to keep from exceeding our Total Allowable Catch on lake trout in MH-1 or we could be penalized by reduction in TAC in future years. An undergraduate student from LSSU will be doing a study this year, collecting samples (trout guts) from anglers and fish cleaning stations and counting pyloric caeca to determine whether fish are lake trout or splake. Anglers from the area are very supportive of a winter splake season.

Jim Baker reported that the Lake Huron Basin Team had approved a proposal to extend the lake trout season in MH-3 through MH-6 to run from January 1<sup>st</sup> through September 30<sup>th</sup>, with no changes in size or bag limits, and had sent the Order Change Recommendation to Lansing for further review. When asked when it would take effect, it was determined that the regulation (if approved by Lansing) would go into effect April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, which would not be in time for next winter's ice fishing season. Changes in the lake trout season for MH-1 and MH-2 will have to wait until the proposal has been reviewed by the TFC in October.

Kurt mentioned that there should be an additional 100,000 yearling lake trout available for southern Lake Huron next summer.

The issue of possession limits was raised briefly. Kurt had checked with Lansing Staff and had determined that the possession limit was indeed part of Statute; the state legislature has to change the law, it can't be changed by the Natural Resources Commission or the Director.

#### **Terms of Reference for the LHCFAC**

Kurt passed out a draft Terms of Reference and asked for comments. Comments received included questions about "will live with" consensus versus majority rule, who will vote for a particular organization, how is a 'consulting decision' taken, and the need for rules for electing or deposing the chairperson. Send further comments to Kurt and Frank.

#### **Next Meeting**

The next Lake Huron Citizens' Fisheries Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for November 4, 2009 from 10 AM to 3 PM at the Ram Center. The location may change. Frank and/or Kurt will send notification with all relevant information.

#### **Adjourn**