



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 November 4, 2009

Minutes

Attendees: David Borgeson, Jim DeClerck, Larry Desloover, Linn Duling, Dave Fielder, Tom Hamilton, Ji He, Steve Hewett, Jim Johnson, Tom Keerl, Gene Kirvan, Frank Krist, Bill Leichtman, Shirley Martin, Ken Merckel, Craig Milkowski, Judy Ogden, Nick Popoff, Gene Raymond, Bob Reider, Ed Retherford, Brandon Schroeder, Julie Shafto, Steve Shafto, Kelley Smith, Fred Sterns, Terry Walsh, Gary Whalen

Frank Krist called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m. Attendees introduced themselves.

Minutes from the June 25th meeting were acknowledged and accepted as is.

Division Updates – Dr. Kelley Smith:

Budget

Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2010 have been set with total reductions for the Department at 9 million dollars. Fisheries Division was reduced by 3 million dollars. To reduce expenditures Fisheries will not be filling the bulk of vacancies including the Lake Huron Basin Coordinator. We were also able to remove boilerplate language from the budget, 'Section 603,' which had been inserted in recent years to prevent the possibility of closing a hatchery.

Salmon Bag Limits

A process to change the salmon bag limit was looked at objectively with recommendations considered from charter operators, fishing reports and creel survey data. If catch rates are above the established benchmark the limit will remain at five, if catch rates drop below the benchmark limits will be reduced to three. Current data indicates catch rates are above the benchmark; therefore, the creel limit will remain at five.

Merger

Executive Order (EO) 2009-45 abolishes the DNR and DEQ as two individual departments and creates one new Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE). The merger will take effect on January 17, 2010.

Mission Statement: Protect and conserve Michigan air, water and other natural resources.

Summary of EO 2009-45

- Gives the Governor the authority to appoint the Director of the DNRE.
- Gives the Governor the authority to appoint the Director of the Department of Agriculture.
- Creates the Michigan Trail Advisory Council.
- Creates an Environmental Science Board – A seven member group that will advise the Department on tough decisions and scientific issues.
- Timely Permitting.
- Transition Manager (Bruce Rasher) – Must have a report to the Governor by end of November for high level administrative structure.

Lake Erie and Lake Huron Basin Coordinator – Dr. Steve Hewett:

Kurt Newman, Lake Huron Basin Coordinator accepted a new position with USGS. Dr. Steve Hewett has agreed to fill that void as Lake Huron Basin Coordinator in addition to his current position as Lake Erie Basin Coordinator. Steve has been the Lake Erie Basin Coordinator since January 2009 and has a background in academics and research. He was also Chief of Fisheries Policy in Wisconsin since 1992 and has a variety of experience in inland and Great Lakes management.

Raising Atlantic Salmon and Cisco in the State Fish Hatchery System – Gary Whalen:

The decision process to introduce and rear new species in the state fish hatchery system depends on numerous factors. Primary factors include water, fish health and biosecurity, rearing space, and desired fish size at release. Secondary factors of concern include transportation logistics, hatchery logistics, and rearing history.

Oden and Marquette State Fish Hatcheries have captive broodstock populations that must be protected at all costs. Bringing in wild broodstock introduces a wide array of new pathogens. Most facilities are also ground water fed. Heating ground water can cost up to a quarter million dollars. From a temperature and biosecurity standpoint Wolf Lake, Thompson and Platte Hatcheries are the only reasonable options for raising wild eggs.

Outdoor rearing space is a limiting factor for yearling fish. A trade-off must be between similar programmed fish; Atlantic salmon yearlings require 2 to 2.5 as much space as other yearlings and cisco spring fingerlings require 1 to 2 times as much space as other fingerlings. Hatchery logistics is another concern. The Platte River Hatchery is under a court order to manage phosphorus which will not allow the facility to increase production without reducing phosphorus.

The Department has a history of 135 years of rearing experiments system wide. We know getting Atlantic salmon to a desirable stocking size is difficult, raising high densities of Atlantic salmon does not work in Michigan's hatcheries and Atlantic salmon acquire

pathogens and have significant disease issues. Problems with scaling up cisco production are unknown; we have little experience in rearing cisco.

The most suitable facilities for raising cisco would be Wolf Lake or Thompson Hatcheries. They maintain the correct water temperature and have a reasonable biosecurity risk. Platte Hatchery may be suitable for Atlantic salmon and there is a history of raising Atlantic salmon at Wolf Lake and Thompson. There will be significant rearing costs considering both species would have to replace existing production at a higher equivalent.

Experimental Rearing of Atlantic salmon at Platte & Increased Production at Wolf Lake – Gary Whalen:

Atlantic Salmon Experiment - We are rearing fall fingerlings, from eggs taken by LSSU in fall 2008, to yearlings. On October 27, 2009 19,000 Atlantic salmon fingerlings were transferred from Lake Superior State University (LSSU) to an outside raceway at the Platte River State Fish Hatchery to evaluate growth, conversion rate, quality and health. These fish will be planted in the spring of 2010. For brood year 2009, eyed eggs will be transferred in November 2009, also to the Platte Hatchery. An attempt will be made to raise the fish to yearlings and plant them in the spring of 2011. The question was asked why this process is taking so long. Can't the Department use LSSU's systems? In response, LSSU's system and the Department's are different. We are taking into account LSSU's advice and experience but we are also using an inland water supply which has the potential to increase pathogens.

Cisco Experiment – The goal is to increase the number to spring fingerlings from 40,000 to 80,000. Efforts will be made to obtain 760,000 eggs during mid-November from the St. Marys River. This will require about 98 females and 98 males to be harvested. The eggs will incubate at Thompson State Fish Hatchery. The eyed eggs will be transferred to Wolf Lake where they will be hatched, marked and stocked in the spring of 2010.

Lake Huron Management Plan – Frank Krist:

Kurt provided an outline before leaving which is now in the review stage. This outline will be presented to the committee and this topic will remain on the agenda. A suggestion was made that the committee could review portions as they were completed rather than waiting for the entire document to be completed. With Kurt moving on, this process has slowed somewhat recently.

Update on the Brown Trout and Cisco Projects and Steelhead Pen Study – Jim Johnson:

Brown trout predator avoidance strategy

Yearling brown trout stocking took place this fall after the cormorants have migrated, and while walleye metabolism is declining. The size of the stocked fish is managed so that most trout are too big for many of the predators to eat. This year they were stocked at 13"

which was larger than requested; the goal size is 11". The first year of stocking brown trout proceeded very well. The fish were healthy and had a good fat index.

Steelhead predator avoidance and Acclimation strategy

Several programs have been implemented to increase survival of stocked steelhead. Some steelhead are stocked as smolting yearlings in late March, so they move out into deeper water quickly to avoid predators. The Thunder Bay River's cormorant problems were solved in this way. Most steelhead smolt in April and May, however. Therefore, at other locations, such as the Au Sable and Au Gres rivers, cormorants are harassed at the stocking sites. In 2010, if logistics are worked out, pen acclimation will be tried to increase return to the creel of steelhead. Pen acclimation allows for a recovery from stocking stress and for better imprinting. The goal is to obtain enough data to compare direct plants versus pen acclimated plants.

Steelhead study sites under consideration for 2011

The number to be stocked below are preliminary until the logistics can be verified. The fish planted at Harrisville and Harbor Beach will be new plants. The experimental fish stocked at Oscoda will be from the existing plant. There will be a plant as described below in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 but the fish will not be marked with CWT until 2011-2013.

Harrisville/Mill Creek – 15,000 CWT raceway acclimated - 15,000 CWT direct stocking

Oscoda/Van Etten– 20,000 CWT acclimated – 20,000 CWT direct plant

Harbor Beach – 15,000 CWT acclimated – 15,000 CWT direct plant

In 2010 we will be testing the ability to hold smolting steelhead in pens and raceways, determining appropriate densities and numbers to hold, studying fish behavior in the raceways, and stocking the fish out. In 2011-2013 prescriptions will be written and fish will be tagged and stocked. Our goal is to increase steelhead survival, which is equivalent to increasing stockings without raising more fish.

Cisco Project

Strategy to accelerate recovery in reintroducing broodstock where absent; provide alternative prey; improve size structure of prey (large bodied prey); and provide recreational fishing opportunity.

Progress - Spawning sites have been identified, appropriate incubation temperatures were identified, underwent successful OTC marking, and stocked 40,000 in the Thunder Bay. Next year we are looking to increase production to 80,000. Update: We were unable to obtain eggs in November and there will be no production for 2010. A report on the Cisco Project will be provided at the next meeting,

Fishery Reports from the Committee Advisors:

Judy Ogden – Port Sanilac and Lexington: April and May was adequate with some Chinook and lake trout present. Once they moved out fishing overall was poor with the exception of a few steelhead. There were more fish than in the past but fishing was very inconsistent. Angler effort on the whole was down.

Ken Merckel – Harbor Beach: Walleye fishing was exceptional. Lake trout was also a phenomenal fishery, moving from the lighthouse to Grindstone and later they established on Mud Ground. Brown trout, steelhead and salmon were poor.

Terry Walsh – Saginaw Bay: Phenomenal walleye fishing! Fewer throw backs this year than in the past; the smaller fish just didn't seem to be there. Business was down, but that was not due to fish not being present. Overall size of fish is improved, with averages being 16-21". Anglers fished May thru June out of North Point Marina off the river mouth in Au Gres. They noted bigger fish were missing; fish in the 6-8 pound range. From Alabaster north, fish were averaging 5-8 pounds. Rarely did they catch a smaller fish. Tons of baitfish were present and the walleye were full of emerald shiners.

Tom Keerl – Harrisville: The walleye harvest was decent in the spring. However, angler effort seriously decreased all summer long. Seeing 6-7 boats in the harbor over a weekend was a lot. Steelhead and salmon are decent. The one charter remaining is marking fish out as far as 340'. Overall, steelhead, salmon, walleye and perch are fair.

Larry Deslover – Law Enforcement: Budget is an issue, two supervisors just retired and we're saving money on wages. Law recently pulled a couple miles of illegal gill net. Please continue to report any unmarked nets.

Julie Shafto – Rogers City: Generally, effort was consistent, but not as high as before. Catch rate was low, but sizes were up. Anglers were catching a nice mixed bag however, containing Chinook, Coho, Atlantics, steelhead and brown trout. Biggest issue was poor weather; high wind and rain are not conducive to big water fishing. Fish were being marked; anglers simply could not get them to bite. Baitfish numbers were up. Taken as a whole lake trout, Chinook, steelhead and walleye were good.

Fred Sterns – Rockport: In late June there was a 2 week window where the catch for phenomenal. Walleye were hitting in 30-40 feet of water while the lake trout were out a little deeper.

Gene Kirvan – Oscoda: Lake trout were very consistent and steelhead were excellent. Chinook were averaging 15 pounds. Walleye were so abundant they were even hitting when anglers were targeting salmon. Forage (smelt and emerald shiners) was abundant in mass quantity.

Tom Hamilton – General Lake Michigan Charter fishing is down 30-40% however fish quality was better. The unstable fishery was weather based.

Gene Raymond – St. Mary's River: Perch were biting in 30-42 feet of water along the north shore in the early a.m. hours. Once the sun came up, the fish were gone. Les Cheneaux, Middle Entrance and Hessel Bay provided nice walleye, while Lake Herring were present in McKay Bay. Northern pike of all sizes were biting from Middle Entrance to Hessel Bay.

Lake Huron Updates – David Borgeson:

Harold Miller, Technician Supervisor out of Gaylord retired after 40 years. Due to budget constraints, a transfer of positions took place instead of normal hiring. Gaylord's new Technician Supervisor is Gerald Casey, formally from Grayling.

A creel effort on the Au Sable River below Mio was undertaken to get a handle on the fishery of larger trout as a follow up for proposed regulation review. A population survey was also completed in October. The last board is scheduled to be removed from Grayling Dam in mid-November.

The new Tower Klieber stream side Sturgeon rearing facility is up and running. Our goal to begin operation was surpassed this year, we produced 1,700 fish! A spring population estimate was also conducted on Mullett Lake. Low walleye numbers have prompted the Department to work with the Tribes to address this situation with minimal sport angler impact.

Discussion of Lake Trout Regulation Change in Northern Lake Huron Tribal Waters – Dave Borgeson:

Harvest limits are generated by the lake trout modeling effort, and measured in weight. The Treaty area (Alpena north) it is a shared fishery. The problem zone is MH-1, Rogers City to Drummond Island, with 9% of the total harvest allocated to the State recreational fishery. There has been a major increase in the size of the lake trout harvested since 2003. This increase in size has increased the total harvest weight. Therefore the State has reached its 9% harvest limit. If we go over that harvest limit, we will be penalized. The goal of a regulation change is a reduction of 30% in recreation harvest. Many options are available; however, the recommended management option would be a maximum size limit of 27" with the option to keep one fish over 32". This proposed option received favorable comments and support.

Discussion of Upcoming Sea Grant Workshops – Brandon Schroeder:

Sea Grant Workshops provide an opportunity for us to take the most current fishery information and ideas to a broader audience. Originally, workshops were one-half of a day and hosted by an organization. Attendance was good but the amount of material that was covered was limited. The last few years the workshops have been full day events and the attendance has been moderate. The full day meetings provide an opportunity to present a thorough update on the status of the Lake and other related items. Brandon is looking for suggestions to increase participation, lower costs, and how to use these workshops to satisfy outreach needs. The meals, hall rentals, and advertizing contribute to the costs.

Suggestions:

Combine the Sea Grant Workshops with other advertised events.

The more workshops the better; perhaps segments could be recorded and posted online. Add hot topics, such as techniques to catch steelhead. Spread geographically throughout the state. Most clubs are willing to host workshops.

Brandon Schroeder will follow-up on a few leads presented at this meeting. The discussion will continue at the January meeting.

Status of Lake Trout in Lake Huron – Ji He:

Lake trout management is diverse and extensive including stocking, surveys, lamprey control and regulations. Lake trout provide a link between the mid waters and the bottom communities by feeding on the abundant goby. Lake trout follow the food and are generalist feeders. They feed from the surface to the bottom and travel from near shore to deep water and provide stability to the ecosystem. The trend since the 1990s is lake trout are living longer with ages up to at least 20 years, however, the spawning biomass in the southern units has decreased significantly. Fewer young fish are appearing in the surveys and growth has decreased. Before 2004, lake trout were fully vulnerable to survey nets by age 6 but currently the fish are not fully vulnerable until age 8 or 9 because of their slower growth. Prior to 2004, some age 4 and age 5 fish were large enough to be taken in survey nets. Stocking has remained stable for many years. Lamprey numbers have decreased significantly since 1998 because of lampricide treatments in the St Marys River.

Meeting Schedule:

January 27, 2010

April 7, 2010

June 23, 2010

October 20, 2010

All meetings are scheduled from 10: a.m. until 3:00 p.m.

Meeting was adjourned at 3:10 p.m.