



MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

TO: All Fisheries Division Staff

FROM: Jim Dexter, Acting Fisheries Chief *Dex*

DATE: September 26, 2011

SUBJECT: Chinook salmon stocking reductions in Lake Huron

Over the past 6 years and especially the past 6 months, a tremendous amount of work has occurred to evaluate Chinook salmon stocking reductions in Lake Huron which were instituted in 2006, and to understand the significant ecological change that has been occurring and is continuing to occur within Lake Huron. The Lake Huron Basin Team and research staff at Alpena, working with both the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee and our lake agency partners, have worked diligently to distill assessment information collected internally and by our partners, and develop recommendations for the public's consideration. Lake Huron has experienced huge shifts in the balance between abundance of forage species and predator populations which has resulted specifically in a general lakewide collapse of Chinook salmon abundance and distribution.

Recreational angler harvest of Chinook salmon in the central and southern main basin of Lake Huron has virtually vanished in less than 10 years. While Lake Michigan Chinook salmon fishing has remained relatively strong, the long-term trend for Lake Huron has distinctly pointed to a need to alter stocking levels of Chinook salmon due to successful natural recruitment in Lake Huron, poor return of stocked Chinook salmon, and what has become an obvious need to reduce stocking efforts to maintain reasonable balance between forage species and predators.

To meet the goals and objectives of the Department, the Division, the Joint Strategic Plan for Management of the Great Lakes Fisheries, and to address the desires of the angling community, the Lake Huron Basin Team has worked to analyze available information and develop a scientifically sound, prudent, and reasonable management action for Lake Huron. This strategy, while completed internally, was discussed with the Province of Ontario, and the Chippewa-Ottawa Resource Authority (CORA) representing the 1836 Tribes who are parties to the 2000 Consent Decree.

Throughout the past six months, public input was sought and incorporated as appropriate into the final recommendation. Three public meetings with anglers and other stakeholders were held in the Lake Huron basin, and a white paper on the subject was posted to the DNR internet site for public review and comment. The Lake Huron Citizen Fishery Advisory Committee was also included and instrumental throughout the process. The Citizen Fishery Advisor Committees are led by our stakeholders, and members of these committees represent angling groups and communities throughout the basin. This committee should be commended for their dedication and participation in assisting our staff to arrive at reasonable solutions for future management of these lakes.

Based on Lake Huron's management goals as defined in their Fish Community Objectives document, managers need to work towards a balance between forage species and predators while assisting in native species recovery and maintaining economically and socially important fisheries. Managers also recognize the value and contribution of natural reproduction and the effects that can have on stocking needs. The stocking recommendations proposed by the Lake Huron Basin Team has been generally accepted by the angling community. This strategy calls for implementation in 2012 of a reduction in the number of Chinook salmon stocked in Lake Huron by nearly 48%. This strategy is large enough to be measured statistically by our assessment programs. Historically stocked locations in Lake Huron, primarily those sites south of Rogers City, will have Chinook salmon stocking suspended for the near future. In the event that there are significant shifts in the ecology of the lake, future stocking of these locations may be warranted.

Specifically, the recommendations that I am approving include:

1. Continue to stock Nunn's Creek (St. Martin's Bay) annually with 250,000 spring fingerlings
2. Continue to stock the Swan River, but at a reduced rate of 375,000 spring fingerlings
3. Continue to stock the Cheboygan River annually with 68,000 (Level 2) spring fingerlings
4. Suspend CHS stocking at all other locations on Lake Huron
5. Continue to evaluate key biological indicators over the next 5-6 years and make appropriate interim stocking adjustments as necessary
6. Investigate the possibility of establishing partial and/or permanent creel collection at the port of Cheboygan

We now understand quite clearly that where Chinook salmon fisheries continue to occur in Lake Huron that the vast majority of those fish are being naturally produced. Continuing to understand this dynamic will be a key principle in helping managers determine future management scenarios using stocked fish. Our commitment as a Division to the angling public is to assess and evaluate the Chinook salmon fishery over the next six years, employing mass marking of salmon for at least the next three years to understand as best we can the contribution of site specific stocking and natural reproduction.

It is very important for staff to convey to stakeholders that this reduction in stocking levels and locations does not necessarily equate to reduced fishing success. Because of the high levels of natural recruitment occurring in Canadian waters of Lake Huron, the ability of fisheries to respond to enhanced levels of forage can occur quickly and result in improved fishing success. Over the past few years we have witnessed increasingly good fishing for Chinook salmon in the northern waters of Lake Huron, and this success appears to be related to naturally produced fish. Without complete creel census in northern Lake Huron, we are currently unable to determine the contribution that stocked fish may be having in some locations.

If you have any questions regarding the recommendation, please speak with Todd Grischke, Lake Huron Basin Coordinator, or Dave Borgeson or Jim Baker, Management Unit supervisors for Lake Huron. These staff know the details behind these plans and can provide you with additional information. It is also important that this information is distributed and explained if

necessary to our creel clerks as they are the frontline with the stakeholders. It is important that clerks who are uncomfortable with their knowledge of this information at minimum provide the correct contact for the individual to gain the information requested.

Lake Huron Chinook Salmon Stocking Reduction Plan				
Location	2011Target	Net pen	2012 and later	% Reduction
Nunns Creek	250,000	N	250,000	0
St. Ignace	40,000	N	0	100
Cheboygan	67,000	Y	68,000	0
Swan River	472,000	N	375,000	21
Mill Creek Pond (Harrisville)	111,000	Y	0	100
Van Etten River	223,000	Y	0	100
Tawas	27,000	N	0	100
Port Austin	72,000	N	0	100
Harbor Beach	80,000	Y	0	100
Harbor Beach	80,000	N	0	100
Port Sanilac	36,000	N	0	100
Lexington	36,000	N	0	100
Total	1,494,000		693,000	

Shaded gray lines are locations covered by the 2000 Consent Decree.

cc: Natural Resource Commission
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