

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting

Wednesday, January 12, 2011 --- Ram Conference Center, Roscommon, MI

Steelhead Fishing Success --- Lake Huron. (Jim Johnson, MDNRE)

Target fishing effort has changed in Lake Huron. The once highly targeted Chinook salmon has been replaced by walleye and trout. Chinook, as a targeted species, is 10% of what it was at the height of its popularity as the sport fish of choice among anglers. Catch rate for Chinook has declined as more people fish for walleye---0 to 4 fish per 100 hrs. of fishing. Walleye fishing has increased dramatically and it is because of its come back and abundance. Walleye are foraging on young Chinook salmon that stay close to shore up to ten months after entering the lake. (Walleye are also feeding on young perch as we will cover later in this report.) Lake Trout catch rate is stable though down in the southern region of Lake Huron because fishermen are targeting walleye. Steelhead catch rate is up; double what it was a year ago—1 per 100 hrs. up from .4 per 100 hrs. in 2009. In the northern region, steelhead catch rate increased to 2.0 per 100 hrs. up from .5 per 100 hrs. in 2009. A modest rise in steelhead catch rate will not replace the Chinook drop off.

The rise in steelhead catch rate is correlated to moving off shore quickly after entering the big lake and the success of wild fish reproduction in the northern region due to a better smelt forage base. Steelhead migration patterns are helping as well. Marking plans may answer reproduction questions. Marking will take place at Harrisville, Oscoda and Harbor Beach from May 9th through May 31st. Au Sable River creel take is not accurately accounted for presently and we need to find a way to get creel counts right.

Lake Trout Mortality Study --- Lake Huron, (Jim Johnson, MDNRE)

Returns show hooking mortality to be minimal. Although, we still suspect mortality is 40 to 50%. We are seeing good numbers of wild lake trout in the fishery.

Cormorant Population in Saginaw Bay, (Dave Fielder, MDNRE)

We estimate that there are eight thousand cormorants living on Cherry Island out in the Bay. Access to the Island is restricted so culling is a problem. Decline in walleye abundance in Saginaw Bay is attributed to migration to the northern water because of warmer than normal water temperature in the Bay itself this past year. Walleye diet now targets yellow perch as the die off of alewife creates need to seek alternative forage source. Perch are becoming a larger per cent of walleye diet in Saginaw Bay. The expected mortality rate of walleye is 30 to 50% and is being mirrored by the data. Yellow perch are reproducing just fine but they are not surviving. The mortality rate for perch age 0 to 1 years is 60 to 70%.

If there were a species suffering a mortality problem in Saginaw Bay it would be yellow perch with the highest mortality. The walleye are doing too well to suggest a cormorant problem. Cormorant control initiatives this year, while very commendable, will not have an appreciable affect on perch fishing results this year. Cormorant impact is not as critical as walleye predation and fisherman hammering perch when they find them.

NOAA Study of Saginaw Bay, (Steven Pothoven, GLERL)

The impact of multiple stressors on fisheries in Saginaw Bay was the subject of a recent study conducted by NOAA. (This was a highly technical recap of the data compiled and analyzed by Purdue University and NOAA to determine what is affecting the survival of yellow perch and walleye in Saginaw Bay. It identifies the walleye's diet patterns by month; April through June --- 28% smelt, 21% shiners, 41% gobies and 10% perch. July through September --- 4% smelt, 4% shiners, 7% shad, 23% gobies and 60% perch. We need to wait until the final minutes are distributed to more accurately summarize the results of Pothoven's study.)

Fisheries Management and Law Enforcement Updates, (Kelly Smith, Steve Hewett, Jim Baker, Dave Borgeson, Larry Deslover and Craig Milkowski)

Executive Order 2011-1 separates the departments of Natural Resources and Environment Quality and is effective on March 13th. Rodney Stokes will become Director of the DNR and Dan Wyant will assume dual roles as DEQ Director as well as the "Group Executive" of the Quality of Life Division. Early retirements accounted for a reduction of 318 people (about half from each department). Only a fraction of these positions will be replaced. Only eighteen staff members are left in Lansing and many of these staffers will be assisting colleagues in the field. There is adequate staff to keep the hatcheries running smoothly. The tagging program for Chinook will move forward in spite of the fact that 85% of the catch was wild Chinook from Lake Huron. Southern Lake Huron unit staff remains intact though most will be reassigned for the spring to other areas that are understaffed. Winter creel surveys are going on now. Walleye fishing has been slow; fishermen are marking fish even though they're not biting. Northern Lake Huron unit has to scramble to get everything done with limited staff. February 27th announcement of fish passage and upcoming Black Lake sturgeon event are on schedule.

Lake Huron Management Plan was delayed until this summer due to current budget and staffing issues. A discussion followed on the best way to educate the public on the fishery. Blogs were discussed as well as traditional methods of engaging the public. The decrease in fishing license purchases resulted in a \$1.5 million hit to the revenue side of the ledger. Kelly fears that continued budget cuts in 2012 and 2013 may result in the "Department of Hatcheries" and good bye research and field studies. Lake Huron Public Meeting format was discussed and a problem solving team will be selected by Frank Krist to develop a plan that addresses education, budget and capability.

Sea grant Spring Workshops for Lake Huron, (Brandon Schroeder, Michigan Sea Grant)

Brandon requested input from the group on number and timing of spring workshops. He will take the information provided and schedule three workshops.

Chinook Research Vessel, (Steve Shafto, Hammond Bay Area Anglers Association)

Steve gave a compelling presentation for the replacement of the research vessel Chinook which was built in 1947. The vessel is in such need of repair that it is not safe to operate. A replacement vessel is the only serious option available and at an expected cost of \$1,500,000. Given Michigan's fiscal budget crisis, it is not reasonable to expect the legislature to approve an expenditure of this magnitude. The only reasonable option is to seek funding through a foundation and get matching funding either from the legislature or from funds already approved.

Meeting Adjourned at 4:00 PM