

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting

Wednesday, April 6, 2011 --- Ram Conference Center, Roscommon, MI

Recreational Fishery Status in Saginaw Bay --- (Dave Fielder, MDNRE)

Creel surveys for walleyes show increases from 2004 – 2010. Harvest was down in 2010 but still 75% better than 2004. Warmer water caused some migration out to main basin but there were more rainbow smelt out there as well. Catch rates in 2010 show that the harvest peaked earlier (June & July) but migration to the main basin could have influenced those results. There are ample number of walleye in the rivers now.

Walleye movement study was initiated with the release of 200 walleye implanted with chips that signal hydrophone receivers placed along the shoreline. These receivers record the fish's movement and temperature as the fish travel. There is a \$100 reward for returning the chips if the fish are caught. The orange tags are located near the dorsal fin. The fishery is very sustainable at the present time. Mortality rate is higher but it's an anomaly because it does not consider migration. Abundance of walleye as measured by gill net takes show excellent levels. Walleye, age three, mean length at capture has come down to 380 mm which speaks to successful numbers and size comparisons for a healthy fishery. Catch rate for year old walleye suggests good catch rate for 2011.

Yellow perch catch rates show that they are reproducing just fine but they have become the prey fish in Saginaw bay. Trends in abundance show some leveling off and the growth rate for year three old perch is excellent. Fishing pressure has been trending downward because the availability of bigger perch is trending down and the walleye fishing interest has increased. Fishermen are targeting walleye more than the perch. Forage fish biomass is in line with other years so it supports the growth rate data.

Research Project Status and Chinook Fishery on Lake Huron --- (Jim Johnson, MDNRE)

Walleye diet study shows that shad are becoming a larger diet component. Walleye reproduction success remains strong as does perch reproduction but predation is high.

The Chinook fishery has undergone dramatic changes. Chinook use to represent 58% of the recreational fishermen's catch and now that percentage has dropped to 8%. Walleye has jumped up to 49% of the recreational fishermen's catch as angling hours decreased for Chinook and increased proportionately for walleye. The harvest has dropped from 26 thousand to 3 thousand caught at index ports on Lake Huron. Chinook are being caught in the north portion of Lake Huron but the catch rate has dropped to half of what it once was. Most Chinooks caught are wild. Stocking Chinooks has little bearing on resulting catches. Chinook salmon survival to brood stock is the issue. Walleye are decimating the small Chinook.

Brown trout and steelhead are showing a slight uptick in 2010 but the longer trend is decreasing. Walleye are moving out into the main basin. Only Alpena and Harbor Beach had banner years.

Chinook Stocking Discussion and Questions for Sea Grant Workshops --- (Todd Grischke)

What would help the the Chinook to survive? Not going to happen. Focus should be on steelhead trout that move off shore quickly when released. We should consider stocking larger browns in the fall after Cormorants move south. (Todd gave a brief update on the Steelhead Acclimation Study at the three study sites, Harrisville, AuSable River and Harbor Beach from 2011-2013.

Cormorant Management and Control Funding

Les Cheneaux Islands reached 90% of there reduction goal. Thunder Bay also reached its control goal.

Funding for control is in question for 2011 and beyond. The funding was accomplished through ear-marks which have been eliminated for 2011. April 9th is the critical date for a decision. Groups are encouraged to send letters of support for continuing this program to the Secretary of Agriculture and the program administrator Cindy Smith. (On April 19th we learned that there will be funding for the cormorant control through mid-July and a new funding proposal has been approved for the remainder of 2011.)

Fisheries Management and Law Enforcement Updates, (Kelly Smith, Todd Grischke, Jim Baker, Dave Borgeson, Larry Desloover and Craig Milkowski MDNR)

Updates were provided by each of the fisheries people present and Tammy Newcomb gave a recap of the protocol that was used (Ten Questions to Answer) in developing the management plan for Lake Huron after 2004. Much discussion followed on the pros and cons of stocking Chinook salmon in Lake Huron and what the proper terminology should be used to describe any alteration in direction. The term "modification" was agreed to be more acceptable than "suspension or reduction" when discussing any potential change in stocking Chinook salmon. Discussion continued about hatchery capacities, rearing time schedules, wild fish versus hatchery stocked fish, raising and planting Cisco, etc.

Kelly Smith reminded the committee that the department had, in 2007, agreed on pursuing four programs for Lake Huron over five years. 1. Net Pen Project to rear Steelhead; 2. Large brown trout stocking program; 3. Atlantic salmon project; and 4. Raising and planting Cisco. The projects required three phases to be completed over five years; research, implementation, and evaluation. He stated that the Atlantic and Cisco programs have not undergone the necessary two years of evaluation. He said Gary will present a management update at the June meeting but that the division has only been able to raise 11,000 Cisco at an "astronomical cost". These will be planted in Lake Huron, as will 25,000 Atlantics in the St. Mary's River. There are concerns that need to be addressed and that the evaluation process must be completed before any action on next steps is contemplated. He suggested that the public be advised at the Sea Grant Workshops that "we just don't have the information yet to decide on next steps".

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Ken Merckel suggested doing a near shore forage study to get better data on the food supply. The committee agreed that this information would be valuable and Ken was asked to consider how we might be able to accomplish the project considering the cutbacks within the department and if volunteer help could be a possible option to consider.

Todd Grischke covered the correction to DNR fishing guide regarding size limit for lake trout caught in Lake Huron Unit MH-1. As a result of exceeding the allowable catch limit for lake trout last year, the DNR had to reduce the maximum size limit to 24 inches this year, in order to be certain it meets the legal requirements of the Consent Agreement with the Tribes in this area (MH-1).

Meeting Adjourned at 3:15 PM

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