

Lake Michigan Fisheries Forum – Meeting Notes

Meeting Time: Wednesday September 17, 2014 from 6:00-9:00 PM

Meeting Location: Lakeshore Technical College, 1290 North Avenue, Cleveland, WI

Meeting Agenda: DNR will summarize high priority comments and seek additional feedback on the Lake Michigan Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (LMIFMP).

Introductions:

- Titus initiated the meeting with brief introductory comments.
- Meeting attendees each introduced themselves by stating their name and affiliation. Meeting attendees included: about 15 public participants (plus a few late arrivals), 4 DNR Fisheries staff, and 4 UW personnel.
 - Commercial, charter, and recreational fishers represented.
- DNR presented slides about the LMIFMP review process including: timeline, outline, visions, summary of public comments, and discussion topics.
- Moderator – The goal today is to incorporate feedback and discussion as a group. Individual comments have already been submitted. Goal today is to reach agreement/consensus and support from the forum. If consensus is not reached, then we'll just move on with the meeting for now but future meetings may be needed for additional discussion. Individual comments can still be submitted via email, etc. Moderator asked if any additional topics should be included for discussion, and nobody responded.
- DNR presented background information on each topic (below) followed by a facilitated discussion and comments for each topic and associated decision points.

Diverse Trout and Salmon Fishery:

- Public comment – The plan states harvest goals, but does not explain how these goals will be achieved (e.g., numbers stocked, rate of return, etc.).

Decision Point: Is this mix of species and harvest compositions desirable? Or do we want to focus more on a particular species?

- Public comment – How will recent stocking allocation decisions impact future harvest goals (i.e., since some Chinooks were allocated for stocking recently, in place of other species)?
 - DNR explained that stocking and production goals haven't recently been met for some species (e.g., steelhead).
- Public comment – Chinook fishing has been slow. We'd like more steelhead and Coho stocked. These species (e.g., steelhead) have a more diverse diet compared to Chinooks.
- Public comment – Deep water strains of lake trout may not be desirable for some anglers because some anglers don't have equipment to fish deep offshore waters.
- Public comment – How will natural reproduction influence harvest and stocking rates?

- DNR explained that reduced stocking is necessary when wild recruitment is high and forage abundance is low.
- Public comment – Forage abundance in Green Bay and Lake Michigan are different. Local Green Bay anglers are interested in stocking more brown trout.
- Public comment – If more of one species is stocked in Green Bay, then will stocking of another species be reduced?
- Public comment – What happened to the brown trout fishery in Green Bay? This fishery seems to be worse than it has been in the past.
- Public comment – What is being done with Coho and steelhead stocking numbers in other states?
- Public comment – Everyone here is devastated by the lack of Chinooks. We understand forage issues, but what will you (DNR) do if harvest rates fall below established targets?
 - DNR explained that stocking numbers depend largely on available forage.
- Public comment – How do you (DNR) allocate fish for stocking?
 - DNR explained that Chinook stocking allocations have recently been addressed, but allocations for other species may need to be discussed (the plan does not go into this detail).
- Moderator – Generally heard that we have consensus/agreements on goals. Yes, people agree with the goals, but there is still some discussion on how to reach these goals.

Decision Point: Are overall harvest goals acceptable? Or should we aim for more or less trout and salmon?

- Public comment – If the alewife population crashes, will stocking numbers be adjusted?
- Public comment – What is the maximum allowable number of salmon we can stock?
 - DNR explained the current quota for Chinooks to be stocked by WI DNR is about 800,000.
- Public comment – What if chubs and smelt crash, then what do we do? At what point will chubs and smelt be so low that we're concerned about stocking too many predators? We know lake trout eat chubs. I'd hate to see a native species like chubs go extinct because we stocked too many predators.
- Public comment – What if lake trout are reproducing naturally because they're eating chubs? We should discuss commercial harvest of lake trout.
- Public comment – Is the impact of brown trout on lake-wide forage abundance minimal (particularly for alewife?) since brown trout eat other prey like gobies?
- Moderator – it sounds like we're at consensus (e.g., overall harvest goals are acceptable) but more info may need to be added to the plan to address what might be done if the alewife population crashes.

Whitefish Sport/Commercial Allocations:

Decision Point: Do we attempt a formal whitefish allocation to be approved by the NR Board? Or monitor the situation and seek allocation if needed?

- Public comment – What year was a limit/regulation put on sport harvest for whitefish?
- Public comment – Why aren't fishing and hunting guides required to fill out catch reports?
 - DNR explained that the winter creel program identifies guided trips, the LMIFMP addresses guide reporting, and guide reporting has already been addressed by the LMFF.
- Public comment – There should be a better reporting system for guides.
- Public comment – Is a size limit in place for the commercial whitefish fishery, but not for the sport fishery?
- Public comment – Commercial harvest is regulated by zone. Most commercial harvest comes from Green Bay. Sport fishery is concentrated in Green Bay too, and sport harvest may exceed commercial harvest. Commercial anglers spend a lot of money for their quota. Harvest areas and allocations between sport and commercial anglers should be reevaluated.
- Public comment – The sport bag limit should be 5 fish.
 - DNR explained the LMIFMP is not meant to address detailed fishing regulations.
- Public comment – Should consider economic impact of a 10 fish limit. There might be fewer anglers with a 5 fish limit.
- Public comment – The LMIFMP seems to be anti-commercial fishing.
- Moderator – Consensus of approach, but continued or additional monitoring needed (i.e., no we should not seek formal allocation at this time, but should monitor the situation and pursued further if needed).

Southern Lake Michigan Yellow Perch Stocking:

Decision Point: Should we pursue a yellow perch stocking program?

- Public comment – What is the feasibility of stocking yellow perch?
- Public comment – Are other states involved in discussions about stocking yellow perch?
- Public comment – Given recent changes in Lake Michigan's productivity (e.g., low forage, etc.) what do tributaries have to offer for yellow perch? Is there enough forage within river systems to support yellow perch stocking?
- Public comment – Maybe yellow perch should be stocked into Green Bay.
- Public comment – Are predators a concern for yellow perch survival and stocking in Green Bay?
- Public comment – Would it be feasible to improve habitat for stocked perch?
- Public comment – Maybe expend energy towards stocking yellow perch, but without a full commitment until the program is evaluated and deemed successful.
- Public comment – Cost estimates must be available for a yellow perch stocking program, especially considering the extent of the yellow perch aquaculture industry.

- Public comment – It sounds like stocking perch is not feasible, so why are we even talking about it? Agree with no (i.e., we should not pursue a yellow perch stocking program.).
- Comment – Any associated impacts to yellow perch genetics?
- Moderator – There seems to be some disagreement on this topic, but overall there may be some agreement for no (i.e., don't pursue a yellow perch stocking program).

Southern Lake Michigan Yellow Perch Commercial Fishery:

Decision Point: Do we develop a new southern Lake Michigan yellow perch allocation between commercial and sport fisheries?

- Public comment – What would a 50/50 split be (i.e., in numbers or pounds of fish) and would this be a reasonable quota for commercial anglers?
- Public comment – The current 'zero' quota for the commercial fishery isn't hurting the fishery, but if yellow perch populations rebound, then commercial anglers could once again start harvesting. If the current allocation to commercial harvest is eliminated, then the commercial fishery would go away forever even if the population rebounds.
- Public comment – The underlying goal is to increase the sport harvest, but any action to remove yellow perch from commercial fishing is strongly opposed.
- Moderator – general consensus is no (i.e., don't develop a new southern Lake Michigan yellow perch allocation. Also, keep the current 50/50 split and keep the commercial season closed until stocks rebound.).

Green Bay Fisheries Management:

Decision Point: Do we continue trout and salmon stocking in Green Bay?

- Public comment – Does the dead zone affect Green Bay's cold-water fishery?
 - DNR explained that the dead zone is primarily located in the southern/warmer waters of Green Bay.
- Public comment – On the northern tip of Gills Rock, there is no walleye fishery. Salmon need to be stocked in northern Green Bay because it's important for tourism.
- Public comment – A major component of the LMIFMP is to maintain diverse fisheries, so salmon should be stocked in Green Bay.
- Public comment – Definitely in favor of stocking salmon in Gills Rock. There is a lot of forage in Green Bay. Four year old salmon take off by August, so Gills Rock needs salmon stocked to maintain a fall fishery. 20 years ago (in the 80's) mature Chinooks returned to Hedgehog Harbor in Gills Rock.
- Public comment – Net pens on the Menominee River may improve returns of spawning salmon.
- Public comment – There is a demand for brown trout and salmon in Green Bay, to contribute to a diverse fishery.

- Moderator – Consensus is yes (i.e., everyone agrees that trout and salmon should be stocked in Green Bay, nobody says no).

Native sport fish species management in harbors and tributaries:

Decision Point: Should we co-stock native sport fish species in Lake Michigan trout and salmon tributaries?

- Public comment – I say no for this, especially during the next couple years. Everyone is trying to improve salmon fishing with net pens, etc., so why stock more walleyes/predators? Later on during this discussion, this person agreed with ‘yes’ if stocking is evaluated on a site specific basis and stocking decisions are made based on what’s best for individual streams.
- Comment – I say yes, because of kids with bikes. Think about the next generation of anglers.
- Public comment – Stocking created a good musky fishery in the Menominee River, which contributes to a diverse fishery.
- Public comment – A diverse river fishery is important. I take my kids fishing a lot, and we don’t have a boat.
- Public comment – Maybe implement a Great Lakes stamp, instead of just a Great Lakes trout and salmon stamp.
- Public comment – What fish species can be stocked near-shore? Would these fish stay near-shore (e.g., would stocked fish stay in the Ahnapee and Kewaunee Rivers)?
- Public comment – I agree with yes.
- Public comment – Near-shore fish are important for providing everyone an opportunity to catch fish.
- Moderator – General consensus is for yes (e.g., we should co-stock native sport fish in Lake Michigan trout and salmon tributaries).

Lake Trout Restoration:

Decision Point: Do we continue lake trout restoration in Wisconsin waters? Are there any compromises?

- Public comment – definitely yes, but include continued support for lamprey control.
- Public comment – yes, for sure.
- Public comment – Years ago we lost the lake trout. Now that we have natural reproduction (finally) why would we stop supporting it? May also want to add support for a commercial lake trout fishery.
- Public comment – Deep water lake trout may not be acceptable to some anglers.
- Comment – At what point do you stop stocking and just let natural fish take over?
- Public comment – Although some lake trout spawn in deep water, they also swim up and are catchable in shallower waters too.
- Public comment – Are all lake trout strains native to Lake Michigan?

- Public comment – What strains of lake trout are currently stocked into Lake Michigan?
- Public comment – What if non-native strains of deep water lake trout are suppressing native deep-water chubs?

Improve Commercial Fishery:

Decision Point: Do we put more fisheries management effort toward the commercial fishery? Are there compromises?

- Public comment – Yes, we should always work to improve the commercial fishery. Commercial fishing is important in WI and should not be minimized. The commercial fishing section within a previous version of the LMIFMP focused mostly on expenses/money (i.e., a funding gap) – the plan should not focus on funding issues. If commercial fishing license fees increase, then some commercial fishers will be lost. Even if license fees increase, it may not improve the funding situation much. External funds should be used to study and manage the commercial fishery. A grant writer should be hired to pursue external funds.
- Public comment – how much is the funding gap?
- Public comment – A funding gap may exist for the sport fishery too. Sport anglers cannot pay for everything.
- Public comment – Sport anglers generally are not against funding DNR programs to manage the commercial fishery, but these funds should not come from sport fishing and hunting license fees.
- Public comment – The commercial fishery contributes a lot of money to the local economy (e.g., selling fish to local groups, buying gas, employment, etc.).
- Moderator – There is some disagreement here, especially related to funding issues. These topics may need to be addressed and discussed further.

Cisco Restoration:

Decision Point: Do we (multi-agency) embark on a cisco restoration project?

- Public comment – Why did the cisco population crash?
- Public comment – If the cisco population increases, will the whitefish population decrease?
- Public comment – The USFWS is already working on a cisco hatchery, so aren't we already committing to cisco restoration?
- Public comment – Is food available in the lake for cisco to eat?
- Public comment – Cisco restoration is a great idea.
- Public comment – Wouldn't want whitefish to be replaced by a lower valued species (i.e., whitefish are more valuable than cisco, for the commercial fishery).
- Public comment – We'd be foolish not to say yes. We should at least look into cisco restoration, monitor it, etc.
- Moderator – General consensus is yes (i.e., in favor of cisco restoration) with some concern about possible impacts to the commercial fishery for whitefish.

Meeting concluded at 9:00 PM.

Meeting attendance

Public

Dennis Hickey

Chuck Weir

Dale Maas

John Janssen

Charlie Henricksen

Lee Haasch

Jake Gajewski

Chad Biersach

Russ Kleinert

Tom Kocourek

Adrian Meseberg

Richard Jones

Roy Kalmerton

John Hanson

Dale Allen

Carl Rasmussen

Mike DiIulio

Thom Gulash

Wisconsin DNR

Brad Eggold

Nick Legler

Dave Boyarski

Mike Donofrio

Wisconsin Sea Grant

Titus Seilheimer

Jane Harrison