NW REGION OUTLOOK FOR 2015 FISHING OPENER

April 6, 2015

Ice-out across Northwest Minnesota will be projected to be slightly ahead of normal this spring. The snowpack across much of the region was gone as of April 1 yet most lakes in the northern half of the region still have 20-30 inches of ice as of April 6. The weather forecast for the middle of April is for below normal temperatures and normal precipitation patterns. Ice is expected to be of all Northwest Region waters by the May 9 fishing opener. Below normal precipitation this winter coupled with early loss of snow cover, will result in very little runoff. Streamflows and lake levels will be below normal, pending heavy spring rainfall events. Northern Pike and Walleye spawning is expected to be completed throughout the Northwest Region before the fishing opener. Traditional Walleye opener lakes that tend to have earlier ice out dates with large expanses of shallow water and those with streams and rivers flowing through them will be the best bets for the opener.

Walleye populations in our natural Walleye lakes and many of our stocked lakes have excellent abundance and fish of a variety of sizes. Various strong year-classes of Walleye are common across most of our natural Walleye lakes and stocking efforts have contributed to good success on others. Walleye from good year-classes produced from the 2009-2011(12-18 inches) will comprise the majority of the catch from our primary Walleye lakes. Anglers can expect excellent Walleye fishing on our large Walleye lakes, particularly on Leech, Upper Red, Lake of the Woods and Cass lakes. The Walleye population on Leech remains strong and anglers can expect abundant Walleye from 12-26 inches. Walleye abundance in Upper Red is near record numbers. Multiple strong year-classes have produced many fish in the 12-20 inch size range. Protected slot limits remain in effect on Leech, Upper Red, Lake of the Woods and several secondary basins in the Region. The Northwest Region also boasts arguably the best trophy Northern Pike lakes in the State of Minnesota: Lake of the Woods and Upper Red Lake. Anglers are reminded that special regulations are in place to protect large pike on both of these waters and about 50 other lakes in the region.

Anglers are reminded of several significant regulations changes that took effect on March 1. There is a new catch and release Bass season that will allow anglers to fish for both Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass beginning on May 9. Anglers must immediately return all Bass to the water until the harvest season opens on May 23. There is also a new catch and release Lake Sturgeon season that allows anglers to fish for lake sturgeon from June 16 through April 14, 2016. This is strictly a catch and release fishing opportunity with a fishing closure from April 15 through June 15 to protect spawning concentrations. Anglers should note that this regulation does not apply to the Minnesota-Ontario border waters (e.g. Rainy River and Lake of the Woods) where more basin-specific regulations apply. Anglers are also reminded that when the Muskie season opens on June 6 there will be a new minimum size limit of 54 inches for this species. All Muskies less than 54 inches must be immediately released. There are special angling regulations on a number of waters in the Northwest Region. Anglers are encouraged to consult the 2015 Fishing Regulations booklet, or the MN DNR website for additional information.

Each year, public accesses need a considerable amount of work to repair ice heave damage and to ensure accesses are in order for the opener. With anticipated normal ice out dates we anticipate that our Parks and Trails staff will be able to have all of the public accesses and loading docks in shape for the 2015 opener. Anglers are reminded to help prevent the spread of invasive species by inspecting their boats for invasive
plants and animal, draining all water from their bilges and livewells and remembering to pull their drain plug before traveling down the road.

Here is a general opener forecast by management area, a few noteworthy lakes that could provide some exceptional fishing, and an overview of the status of the large Walleye lakes.

**BAUDETTE**

**Rainy River:** Each spring, Walleye migrate from Lake of the Woods to the Rainy River to spawn. Many of those fish are still in the river when the Walleye season opens in May. This can lead to some great fishing opportunities for anglers. And, although many anglers flock to Lake of the Woods for the annual Walleye opener, not many people fish on the Rainy River that time of the year. The Rainy River and its tributaries are also home to a high quality pike population. Northern Pike fishing can be very good in spring and early summer. Additionally, the Rainy River is also home to world class Lake Sturgeon fishery. Harvest for Lake Sturgeon is marked by two distinct time periods, April 24-May 7 and from July 1-September 30 where fish must be 45-50 inches inclusive, or over 75 inches. Fishing for Lake Sturgeon is not permitted from May16-June 30 with the remainder of the season being catch-and-release only. Besides great fishing, the Rainy River corridor can also offer some protection from the cold winds that often occur during the early part of the Walleye season. There are multiple public boat ramps and parks along the Rainy River from International Falls, MN to the mouth of the Rainy River, just north of Baudette, MN. A public fishing pier is also available on Baudette Bay in the City of Baudette.

For more information about fishing the Rainy River please visit:  
http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/fisheries/baudette/rainy_river_brochure.pdf

**Hayes Lake:** Hayes Lake is a 180-acre impoundment on the Roseau River located approximately 18 miles southeast of Roseau. The lake is nestled entirely within Hayes Lake State Park and offers visitors numerous amenities including a concrete boat ramp, fishing cleaning shack, canoe rental, and on-site camping. A state park pass is needed to access Hayes Lake, but a fishing license is not required for Minnesota residents. No outboard motors are permitted on Hayes Lake and boaters must utilize a paddle or electric trolling motor. Hayes Lake provides a unique opportunity in northwestern Minnesota where fishable lakes are scarce. Hayes Lake supports a healthy population of Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, and Northern Pike. A 2014 fisheries assessment for Hayes Lake documented Largemouth Bass ranging in length from 7 to 22 inches with an average length of 13 inches. Bluegill in Hayes Lake are reported to be in low to moderate abundance with a healthy size distribution. Average Bluegill length was just over 6 inches with fish over 10 inches sampled. Northern Pike are abundant in Hayes Lake where the average length is 22 inches and fish up 37 inches sampled in 2014.

**BEMIDJI**

**General Outlook for Bemidji Area:**
Spring of 2015 appears to be heading for an early ice out. Lack of a significant snowpack this winter and periodic unseasonably warm temperature created bare ice conditions end of March. Timing of ice out can have considerable effect on the Walleye bite and location of fish concentrations on opening weekend. Early ice-out can result in significant Walleye dispersal before fishing opener. Another factor to consider with the lack of snow cover is very little spring runoff to supplement lake levels. Unless considerable rainfall occurs between now and fishing opener, expect lower than normal lake levels on many Bemidji Area lakes. Plan accordingly for boat accesses that may be somewhat more difficult than usual.

**Gull Lake, Beltrami County (2,248 acres)**
Gull Lake is located north of the City of Bemidji near the City of Tenstrike. It is a moderate sized lake for the Bemidji Area with a diverse variety of fish species to choose from. The 2014 fisheries assessment sampled Walleye at a modest 2.5 fish per gill net, but this lake produces good Walleye fishing at relatively low assessment catch rates. The Gull Lake Walleye fishery is maintained by annual fry stocking and current size distribution is dominated by 13-15 inch fish (age 3) and 18-19 inch fish (age 6). Northern Pike are very abundant with size strongly dominated by fish under 21 inches. Besides the typical opening day species, Gull Lake also supports an excellent Bluegill fishery with good numbers of of 8-9 inch fish, as well as some exceeding 10 inches. A five Sunfish bag limit is in place to protect this fishery. Gull Lake
may also be a great place to try the new early catch and release season for Largemouth Bass. 2015 will be the first year that it is legal to target Bass concurrent with the Walleye fishing opener, though all Bass caught will need to be released until the harvest season opens on May 23.

**Sandy Lake, Beltrami (260 acres)**: Sandy Lake is a relatively small Bass-panfish type lake located just northwest of Gull Lake. Sandy Lake is stocked with Walleye fingerlings on alternate years. The 2014 fisheries assessment sampled Walleye at 2.5 fish per gill net. While this catch rate is not exceptional for a destination Walleye lake, it is a very good catch rate for this lake type. The 2014 gill net sample had an abundance of Walleye in the 12-16 inch size groups, with a scattering of larger fish up to 26 inches. Sandy Lake also is a good Largemouth Bass lake, making it an excellent choice to try some early catch and release Bass fishing. Being a smaller lake, access parking space is somewhat limited, and low water may make launching larger boats difficult.

**DETROIT LAKES**

**General Outlook for the Detroit Lakes Area**: As of late-March, the Detroit Lakes Management Area is anticipating an average ice-out with most lakes ice-free by the third week of April. There is no snow pack on area lakes and little actual melting has occurred. Long range forecasts suggest these conditions should extend through the next several weeks. The overall lack of snow cover this winter should have prevented any significant winterkill of fish populations in the shallow lakes within the Detroit Lakes area.

**Island Lake, Becker County (1,142 acres)** is located in south central Becker County approximately twenty miles east of the city of Detroit Lakes. Island Lake receives a substantial amount of fishing activity when fishing is good. Island Lake has an exceptional Walleye population for a lake of its size, particularly considering the population is entirely supported by natural reproduction. Ten of the past twelve years of Walleye year-classes were considered strong. The historic average Walleye catch rate for Island Lake is nearly 17 fish/net, and this was the case during the most recent fisheries assessment in 2012 when 16 fish/net were caught. Anglers should find plenty of harvestable size fish in Island Lake as Walleyes have historically averaged just less than 15 inches in length. Island Lake also contains one of the few populations of Smallmouth Bass in the Detroit Lakes Area. While both species of black Bass are found in Island Lake, Smallmouth Bass are more abundant and generally of larger size.

**Lake Melissa, Becker County (1,831 acres)** is located in south central Becker County approximately seven miles south of the city of Detroit Lakes. Lake Melissa's fish populations are similar to those of many central Minnesota lakes. Walleye, Northern Pike, Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, and Black Crappie are all typical angling targets here. Zebra mussels were discovered in the lake in the summer of 2014 and people recreating on the lake are encouraged to clean, drain, and dry their equipment to prevent the spread of these mussels to other waters. The Walleye catch rate in 2014 was 9.5 fish/net. Walleyes averaged 14.5 inches in length which should provide good angling opportunity early in the season. Lake Melissa contains a quality Northern Pike population and is regulated by a protected slot limit of 24 to 36 inches. This regulation has been in effect since 1996 and is credited with increasing the average size of Northern Pike as well as more than doubling the number of Northern Pike longer than 24 inches. Black Crappie receive the bulk of winter angling pressure on Lake Melissa and anglers targeting Black Crappie can also have good success in early spring. Anglers taking advantage of the new early catch and release season may also find good fishing for Largemouth Bass, both in numbers and size.

**FERGUS FALLS**

**General Outlook for Fergus Falls Area**: As of late March, area lakes still have plenty of ice but it is becoming soft. Ice out should be about average this year; therefore, Walleye spawning activities should occur during the normal time-frame about mid to late April. Anglers can expect to find Walleyes in post-spawn conditions by the May 9th opener. Male Walleyes may be actively feeding during this period and will likely be in shallow water areas while larger female Walleyes may still be recovering from spawning activities. Northern Pike will be feeding actively as they spawn earlier than Walleyes. Panfish opportunities may be a viable option if the Walleye and Northern Pike are not cooperating. Many area lakes presently support abundant populations of Bluegill and Black Crappie with good size structures.
Generally speaking, anglers should expect good Walleye fishing on area lakes in 2015 as several strong natural year classes and supplemental stockings have established abundant Walleye populations.

**Anna Lake (538 acres)** is located in south-central Otter Tail County four miles north of Underwood. A state owned public access is located off of County Road 35 along the southwest shoreline. Anna Lake is considered a good all-around fishing lake. The Walleye catch rate during the 2014 fish population assessment was 9.4 per net, which exceeds the expected range for this classification of lake and is the highest recorded for this lake. The 2010 and 2011 year classes are strong and they composed a majority of the Walleye sample. Walleyes from these year classes ranged in length from 11.0 to 19.5 inches. Overall, Walleyes ranged in length from 10.3 to 21.9 inches with a mean length and weight of 14.5 inches and 1.1 pounds. A moderate-density Northern Pike population exists with a good average size. Pike ranged in length from 19.5 to 32.6 inches with a mean length and weight of 23.2 inches and 2.6 pounds. Bluegills and Crappies are both abundant and both have good size structures. Bluegills up to 8.7 inches and Crappies up to 13.8 inches were sampled in the 2014 lake survey. Bluegills and Crappies could provide an alternative if Walleye and pike are not active.

**Big Pine Lake (4,730 acres)**: is located in northeastern Otter Tail County two miles east of Perham. State owned public accesses are located along the northwest, north, and southeast shorelines. Big Pine Lake is renowned as one of the best Walleye angling lakes in the county. The Walleye catch rate during the 2014 fish population assessment was 16.0 per net, which exceeds the expected range for this classification of lake. The Walleye catch rate has consistently exceeded the expected range. The 2011 year class is very strong and composed a majority of the Walleye sample. Walleyes from this year class ranged in length from 11.5 to 15.6 inches. Overall, Walleyes ranged in length from 6.7 to 25.7 inches with a mean length and weight of 13.9 inches and 1.1 pounds. Anglers are reminded that an 18.0 to 26.0 inch protected slot limit is in effect for Walleyes on Big Pine Lake. Anglers are allowed to possess one Walleye over 26.0 inches in length. A moderate-density Northern Pike population exists with a good average size. Pike ranged in length from 14.1 to 33.9 inches with a mean length and weight of 22.7 inches and 2.6 pounds.

**GLENWOOD**

**General Outlook for Glenwood Area lakes:** Aside from brief cool snaps, spring weather conditions are gradually melting ice on area lakes. We’re ahead of where we were last year at this time. As of April 1, there is little snow cover and ice thickness ranges from 8-18 inches.

Fishing is predicted to be very good in 2015 in response to strong numbers of both Walleyes and Crappies. Three perennial opener selections are provided for opener considerations, but anticipate good fishing throughout most the Glenwood Fisheries Management Area.

**Lake Reno (3,793 acres)** is located 6 miles south of Alexandria on State Highway 29. Public access ramps are located on the northeast end directly off Highway 29 and on the southwest end off Pope County Road 15 via Sugar Sand Shores Road. Lake Reno is a shallow, bowl shaped basin with limited structure. Reno's Walleye population is largely self-sustaining; however, periodic fry-stocking appears to be highly effective at maintaining elevated abundance levels. Walleye gill net captures during 2010 and 2014 surveys averaged 18.5 fish per net. Average length of survey catches in 2014 was 17.5 inches. At least seven age groups were represented in the gill net catch. For the 2015 season, look for the 2011 year class (4 year-old fish) to contribute greatly to the harvest. These fish will be around 16 inches in length.

Anglers have enjoyed exceptional Crappie fishing over the last year in response to recruitment of a very strong 2010 year class into the fishery. These four-year-old fish averaged 10.9 inches at time of capture in early July 2014. This year class has been subject to heavy harvest so fishing potential has peaked, but they remain moderately abundant and a relatively strong 2012 year class is coming on. Fish from the 2012 year class should average 9.0 inches this summer.

**Pelican Lake (3,761 acres)** is a large, shallow, fertile lake located in northeast Grant County near Ashby. Maximum depth is 21 feet. Average depth is 10 feet. Due to its irregular shape, the lake has nearly 28 miles of shoreline. A recently improved public access is located on the northwest shore off State Highway 78. Walleyes are abundant. Gill net catches during the 2013 survey averaged 10.5 fish/net. The population sample included representatives of 12 age groups. Strong year classes were established in 2008,
Fishing could be very good for the 2015 season. Fish in these age groups will vary from 14 to 20 inches in length.

Pelican Lake also supports good Crappie fishing. Both Black and White Crappies were captured during the 2013 survey. Annual recruitment proved good in 2009, 2010, and 2011, so much of the Black Crappie population is comprised of young fish. Crappies grow fast in Pelican Lake and most of these young fish will be near 10.0 inches in length in 2015. Crappies also have an extended life span in Pelican Lake. Age distribution of 2013 population samples extended to age 10. Pelican Lake can yield trophy-size fish. The largest Black Crappie measured during the 2013 survey was 15.2 inches in total length.

Lake Osakis (6,389 acres) is a large natural lake sprawling across portions of both Douglas and Todd Counties in west-central Minnesota. Maximum depth is 73 feet. Average depth is estimated at 20 feet. Lake Osakis is nutrient rich and supports a highly productive fishery. A good Walleye fishery is sustained by natural reproduction and supplemental stockings. Walleye densities exceeded expectations during the 2013 survey. Gill net captures averaged 14 Walleyes per net. Back-to-back strong year classes established in 2011 and 2010 should produce excellent fishing for the 2015 season. Based on past growth rates, these 4- and 5-year-old fish should range from 16 to 20 inches in length in 2015. Anglers are reminded that Lake Osakis has a 15-inch minimum length regulation in place which requires the immediate release of all Walleyes less than 15 inches in total length.

Anglers fishing Lake Osakis have enjoyed very good Crappie fishing over the last year in response to establishment of an exceptionally strong year class in 2010. These four-year-old Crappies averaged 9.7 inches in length at time of the August, 2014 survey. With additional growth, these fish should average 11 inches in 2015. Annual recruitment has not been as strong in subsequent years, so harvest will likely begin to tail off with harvest incurred from the 2010 year class.

There are four public access sites available, three are concrete, and one is gravel. The north access is gravel and is located on the north end of the lake off 145th Avenue. The northeast access is off Faraway Lane next to Battle Point. The south access is just off Central Avenue in Osakis. Lastly, the northwest access is located off County Road 10.

PARK RAPIDS

General Outlook for Park Rapids Area: They say all things average out. In contrast to the last couple years, the winter of 2014-15 was relatively mild. A lack of snow cover will mean an earlier than usual ice-out, but it also means less runoff and lower than normal stream flows and water levels in many lakes. The lack of snow and wide temperature swings also caused more ice heave and damage to access ramps than usual. Parks & Trails crews will be scrambling to make repairs. There may be a few docks that don’t get out by the fishing opener, but they hope to have all ramps ready to go. Northern Pike spawning will be well over by opener and Walleye spawning may be about normal, so both will probably be in typical early season patterns.

Anglers should remember Park Rapids area lakes with special or experimental regulations that differ from state-wide regulations. Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Crow Wing Lakes have a 40 inch minimum length limit for Northern Pike, with one over 40 inches allowed in possession. Fifth and Sixth Crow Wing Lakes, Lake George, Big Mantrap Lake, and Blueberry Lake (Wadena County) have 24 to 36 inch protected slot length limits for Northern Pike. That regulation allows anglers to keep Northern Pike less than 24 inches or one over 36 inches in possession, and requires immediate release of pike between 24 and 36 inches. The more restrictive regulations are designed to improve sizes of Northern Pike. Big Sand and Kabekona Lakes have more restrictive Walleye regulations, and Big Mantrap and Spider Lakes have more restrictive Crappie regulations to try to improve populations of those species. Lester Lake, a small lake in northeastern Hubbard County has a catch and release only regulation for all species of fish to protect a very fragile, high quality fishery. La Salle Lake has reduced possession limits of two for Walleye, five for Crappie and Sunfish, ten for Perch, and catch and release (no harvest) for Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass to protect those fish populations because of the lake’s low productivity.
Kabekona Lake (2,433 acres) is located about three miles south of Laporte in northeastern Hubbard County. It has a maximum depth of 133 feet. A county owned access is located at the west end of the lake, off highway 64. Kabekona has had an experimental Walleye regulation since 2006. All Walleye between 18 and 26 inches must be immediately released. Anglers are allowed to harvest Walleye less than 18 inches and one over 26 inches in a possession limit of four. The regulation was intended to improve the overall health of the walleye population in Kabekona, with particular interest in increasing natural reproduction. Evaluations suggest very positive results with near record overall abundance and more young of the year Walleye in fall sampling. An abundance of Walleye in the protected size range should provide good catch rates but there are also plenty of fish in the 13 to 17 inch size range if anglers want a meal. The Walleye regulation is scheduled to sunset in 2016, so it will be reviewed this fall and a decision will be made whether to keep modify or rescind the regulation. Northern Pike have never been very abundant in Kabekona, but they can reach good sizes. Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass, Crappies, Bluegills and Pumpkinseed Sunfish can also be found in this lake, but those species are not real abundant and somewhat small sized due to a lack of shallow water habitat and cover.

Upper and Lower Bottle Lakes (459 and 641 acres) have maximum depths of 55 and 110 feet. They are located about eight miles northeast of Park Rapids. A state owned public access is located on the north end of Upper Bottle Lake, but it may be difficult for larger boats. Additional access is available off County Road 40, through Emma Lake and the Sand River to Lower Bottle. During assessments of the lakes in 2013, Walleye abundance was higher in both lakes than any previous sample. Strong year classes of Walleye have been observed from both stocked and non-stocked years, suggesting that stocking and natural reproduction are both contributing to the lakes’ Walleye populations. Most of the Walleyes in the 2013 samples were 12 to 17 inches, but individuals were collected up to 26 inches. There are also good populations of Northern Pike, Bluegill, sunfish, and Bass in the Bottle Lakes.

Mantrap Lake (1,618 acres) is located about 14 miles northeast of Park Rapids, in central Hubbard County. There are three main basins connected by narrow channels, but there are also numerous bays and a few islands. Shoreline development is concentrated in a few areas. The remaining undeveloped shoreline, bays and islands give the lake a wilderness character. The east basin has a maximum depth of 68 feet, but much of the lake is shallow with abundant emergent and submerged vegetation providing excellent fish habitat. Mantrap is managed primarily for Muskellunge and Northern Pike. The Northern Pike population has been getting better because of the experimental 24 to 36 inch protected slot length limit. Since the regulation was implemented in 2003, the abundance of medium to large Pike has increased and the number of small Pike has decreased. As a result, anglers will now find plenty of Northern Pike in the 24 to 36 inch size range to provide good action, but also still plenty of 19 to 24 inches if they want to harvest some. Mantrap also had an experimental Crappie regulation that restricted harvest to those 10 inches and larger and limited possession to 5 in an attempt to improve Crappie sizes. Evaluations indicated Crappie sizes were not improving much, so the regulation was changed to allow harvest of any size but still a possession limit of 5. Anglers will find plenty of Crappies between 7 and 10 inches, and a few up to 13 inches. Mantrap also produces low numbers but good sized Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass and abundant but small sized Bluegill and Perch. Muskellunge have increased both in numbers and size since stocking with Leech Lake strain fish was begun in 1988, and fish over 50 inches are sampled regularly. Muskie anglers will want to give Mantrap a try when the season opens on June 6.
General Outlook for Walker Area:

Ice out is expected to be slightly earlier than normal, well ahead of 2014 but not as early as we saw in 2012. Walleye spawning should be completed and fish are expected to be less congregated than in some years.

Northern Pike are abundant in most area lakes with smaller fish easy to find. Several lakes in the Walker Area have a protected slot limit of 24 to 36 inches for Northern Pike. In most cases, surveys have found an increase in the proportion of pike 30+ inches long since the regulations were implemented in 2003. Panfish action should be good in shallow water areas by Memorial Day. The Walker area also has four designated stream trout lakes where rainbow trout fishing also opens on May 9.

A number of lakes in the Walker area have experimental or special regulations for certain species. These special rules are designed to maintain quality fisheries. A notice of these regulations is typically posted at each lake’s public access. However, anglers should consult their 2015 Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet for the most current information.

**Big Boy Lake (3,452 acres)** is located east of Leech Lake and between Federal Dam and Longville. The public access is on the west side of the lake off of Township Road 128. Boy Lake is an excellent multi-species destination for anglers. In 2013, the lake had an excellent Walleye population with sizes ranging from 8-23” long. Northern Pike are abundant, with most fish present being less than 24” long. The lake also supports quality populations of Black Crappie, Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, and Muskellunge. The Muskellunge population is relatively low-density, but most fish sampled in 2013 were 40” or longer.

**Woman Lake (5,496 acres)** is located southeast of Longville in Cass County. The main public access is located on the north side of the lake off of County Road 5. Access can also be gained by boat from Girl Lake. The Walleye population is robust, with fish sampled in 2014 ranging from 7-22” long. A couple of consecutive good year classes have reached harvestable sizes and should provide harvest opportunity. Similar to other good Walleye lakes in the area, anglers tend to do best until mid-June and again during September and October. Woman Lake has a good population of quality-sized Yellow Perch and these are often targeted by anglers during fall. Northern Pike numbers are similar to other lakes of this type. The proportion of pike longer than 28 inches has increased since a protected slot limit of 24 to 36 inches was put in place in 2003. Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass angling can also be very good once the Bass season opens, and a low-density Muskellunge population with excellent size structure is also present.

**NW REGION LARGE LAKE OUTLOOK**

**Lake of the Woods:** Walleye and Sauger populations are monitored annually on Lake of the Woods. This assessment has been conducted every September since 1981. One of the valuable bits of information that is gained from annual netting is an understanding of when strong year classes are produced. There was a very strong Walleye year class produced in 2011. These Walleye will be 12 to 13 inches long on the opener, so they will be of a size most anglers will keep. The 2013 Walleye year class also appears to be strong, but these fish will only be about 10 inches long on the opener. The most abundant size group of Walleye is from 12 to 15 inches long. Walleye from 15 through 19 inches long are present at slightly below their long-term average abundance.

Lake of the Woods is well known for the trophy-size Walleye, and Walleye up to 32 inches long are sampled every year during DNR surveys. With the spring we are experiencing this year, most of these large Walleye should have returned to Lake of the Woods, from their spawning sites on the Rainy River, by the time the Walleye season opens. Generally, a 25-inch long Walleye is about 10 years old, and a 30-inch Walleye is about 20 years old.

Northern Pike are frequently overlooked by many anglers on Lake of the Woods. Both Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River support populations of trophy pike, with individuals over 40 inches long. The Northern Pike season is open continuously on Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. The period immediately after ice-out is an excellent time to participate in this fishery. Anglers who would like to target Northern Pike should focus their efforts near spawning sites. Major spawning sites are Bostic Creek, Zippel Bay, and the Warroad River.
Lake Sturgeon are another species that anglers may fish for, particularly in the lower reaches of the Rainy River or Fournile Bay. Last summer a lake Sturgeon population estimate was conducted on the Rainy River and in Lake of the Woods. We found that there are about 92,000 Lake Sturgeon longer than 40 inches long in the system. Of the almost 2,000 Sturgeon we handled last summer, the largest Sturgeon was 72 inches long, and had an estimated weight of 104 pounds.

Anglers should be aware of special fishing regulations on Lake of the Woods. These regulations are designed to maintain a quality fishery and fishing experience. The combined Walleye-Sauger limit is six, but no more than four of those fish may be Walleye. All Walleye between 19.5 and 28 inches in length must be immediately released, and only one Walleye longer than 28 inches may be possessed.

Northern Pike are also managed by special regulation. The possession limit is three. All Northern Pike from 30 to 40 inches long must be released immediately. An angler may possess one Northern Pike over 40 inches long.

Sturgeon are highly vulnerable to over-harvest, so the regulations governing the harvest of these fish are fairly restrictive. Anglers that have purchased a Lake Sturgeon Harvest Tag may harvest one Lake Sturgeon per calendar year. The harvest season runs from April 24 to May 7, and from July 1 to September 30. After harvesting a Sturgeon anglers much register their fish within 48 hours. Anglers may catch and release fish for Sturgeon (without a Sturgeon Harvest Tag) all year, except the lake Sturgeon season is closed from May 16 to June 30, so anglers cannot fish for Sturgeon during this period. Only Lake Sturgeon from 45 to 50 inches long, or over 75 inches long, may be harvested.

Anglers should also be aware that Lake Sturgeon regulations are much more restrictive in Ontario. Sturgeon are classified as Threatened and the fishing season is closed. You may not harvest, or fish for, Sturgeon on the Ontario portions of Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. If you are fishing for Lake Sturgeon, know which side of the border you are on.

Spiny water flea, an invasive species, was discovered in Lake of the Woods in 2007, so Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River have been designated as infested waters. With this infestation, anglers have an obligation to prevent the spread of this invading species to other water bodies. Spiny water fleas are predators that will compete with young Walleye, Sauger and Yellow Perch for food resources. They are a highly undesirable species in any water body. Anglers must make sure they do not transport any lake water in their boats. Bilges, live wells and bait wells must all be drained at boat landings, and boat has to be trailered with all of the plugs out. Also, spiny water flea tends to wrap around fishing line and anchor rope, so anglers must clean their fishing equipment when leaving the lake or river. Check the DNR web site for more specific information of how to prevent the spread of spiny water flea.

**Cass Lake:** Cass Lake is typically a good choice for early season Walleye fishing. The Walleye population is healthy and comprised of good numbers of fish distributed among many different size and age classes. Angler catch rates should be good, with an abundance of fish in the 14 to 19 inch range and good numbers of fish in the low- to mid-twenties. Anglers will also likely catch a number of 8 to 10 inchers that, although not keeper-size yet, are a sign of good things to come.

The Northern Pike population is at above-average levels of abundance with good numbers of fish greater than 26 inches. Cass Lake generally produces a few trophy Northern Pike each year as well. Cass is also well known as a premier native musky lake. Anglers are reminded that the statewide Muskellunge season opens on June 6 and the new statewide minimum length limit is 54 inches.

Yellow Perch numbers in Cass Lake are a bit below the long-term average, with lots of fish in the 8-inch range. In addition to good numbers of these mid-sized fish, fish up to 12 inches are not uncommon. Anglers should not have trouble finding some keeper-sized Perch but might have to do a little sorting along the way.

**Upper Red Lake:** The fishing outlook for Upper Red Lake is excellent. On waters under the jurisdiction of the State of Minnesota (the eastern 48,000 acres of Upper Red Lake), licensed anglers will be allowed a daily and possession limit of two Walleyes. All Walleye from 17 to 26 inches in length must be
immediately released, with only one greater than 26 inches allowed in possession. This is a more restrictive regulation than recent open-water seasons and is the result of two consecutive years with high harvest. Although the population remains healthy, these restrictive regulations are necessary to comply with the Harvest Plan for Red Lakes Walleye stocks agreed to by the State of Minnesota and the Red Lake Nation.

Walleye catch rates during early season should be high which will result in the need to release some Walleyes so please remember to handle all fish carefully and immediately release fish that will not be harvested. There are good numbers of fish from 14 to 17 inches so finding keeper-sized fish this year should not be a problem. Be prepared to accurately measure your catch by having the proper tools in your boat. The mouth of the Tamarac River is a very popular early season fishing location. Early in the season there is good fishing around the entire shoreline break. Consider spreading out to get away from the crowds. This is also a good way to find fish with a wider range of sizes should you have trouble finding your preferred size of fish.

Anglers interested in catching large Northern Pike are probably already familiar with Upper Red Lake. Northern Pike size structure is impressive, and although angler catch rates may be low at times, the incentive is the potential to catch a trophy. Anglers should be aware of the special regulation for Northern Pike: all fish from 26 to 44 inches must be immediately released, and only one fish greater than 44 inches is allowed in possession. Anglers should be prepared to safely handle these large fish so they can survive the release process and live to fight another day. In addition to trophy pike, there is an abundance of smaller pike (20 to 26 inches) in the population right now as well. If you are looking for some bonus fish to harvest in addition to Walleye, there should be ample opportunity to find some fish just under the protected slot limit.

Black Crappie numbers are a little higher than normal although nothing like the “Crappie boom” in the early 2000s. Catching a few bonus fish to supplement the bag is a real possibility for anglers that know where to look. Early season will be best as fish will scatter after the spawn and be difficult to target. These fish are the result of recent hatches from 2010 to 2013 and are typically 8 to 12 inches, though there have been a few reports of fish 14 to 15 inches as well.

Anglers should also be prepared to encounter a variety of DNR staff while fishing or accessing Upper Red Lake. In addition to requests by fisheries creel survey clerks and conservation officers, staff from the DNR’s invasive species program may be doing inspections and providing educational information. With spiny water fleas established in Rainy Lake, the Rainy River, and Lake of the Woods, Upper Red Lake and other nearby waters are at risk for direct transfer of this aquatic nuisance species by anglers. Anglers leaving any lake should remember that they are required by law to drain all water from boats, live wells, and bait wells and ensure the effective removal of all aquatic plants and/or other invasive species from their boat, trailer, and other equipment.

**Leech Lake:** The Walleye population in Leech Lake continues to be strong. Lengths of Walleye sampled in 2014 ranged from 7-26 inches in length and several year classes will be of harvestable sizes. A special regulation that requires the immediate release of all Walleye from 20.0-26.0 inches was implemented in 2014 and will continue into the 2015 angling season. This regulation change was intended to increase angler harvest opportunity while protecting larger fish for reproduction. Anglers targeting Walleye are usually most successful until mid-June and again during September and October.

Quality fishing opportunities for species other than Walleye are also present on Leech Lake. The Northern Pike population continues to be good, with about 25% of pike sampled with survey nets in 2014 being 24 inches or larger. The size quality of Yellow Perch continues to be good, with about one third of fish sampled being 8” or longer. Abundance of Yellow Perch, however, continues to be near the historical low and anglers again can expect to work harder and spend more time sorting to reach a limit of Yellow Perch this season. Spring electrofishing surveys indicated good numbers of Largemouth Bass and Bluegills in Boy, Headquarters, Steamboat, and Shingobee bays. Thirty-six percent of Bass sampled were 15” or longer, while 30% of Bluegills sampled were 8” or larger. The average size of black Crappie sampled in the spring electrofishing survey was 10.3” with fish up to 15” observed. Musky fishing was excellent in 2014 and opportunities should continue to be good in 2015. Statewide regulations apply for all species on Leech Lake other than Walleye.
Staff from the DNR’s invasive species program will continue to inspect watercraft and provide educational information to reduce the spread of invasive species. Now that spiny water fleas have become established in Rainy Lake, the Rainy River, and Lake of the Woods, and zebra mussels were recently discovered in nearby Winnibigoshish and Cass lakes, nearby waters are at an increased risk for introduction of these species by boaters. Anglers and boaters alike leaving any lake should remember that they are required by law to drain all water from boats, live wells, and bait wells and ensure the effective removal of all aquatic plants and/or other invasive species from their boat, trailer, and other equipment. Leech Lake is infested with Eurasian watermilfoil.