

Summary of the April 4, 2005 meeting of the Lake Superior Advisory Group – Lake Trout

Sea Grant Building at 2305 East Fifth St., Monday, April 4, 2005, 7 to 9:00 p.m.

Don Schreiner thanked folks for coming to the meeting and asked participants if they were interested in combining the topics of enforcement, regulations and habitat or splitting out habitat into a separate meeting for June.

Don introduced the topics for presentation, including lake trout status, statistical catch at age modeling, stocking criteria, and possible directions for lake trout management. Ted Halpern presented information on lake trout status and modeling. Historical Lake trout abundance was discussed in relation to sea lamprey and commercial fishing. The effects of sea lamprey control, and stocking history were discussed. Catch per effort (CPE) in the May assessment shows a rise and then a decline, while the percent wild has increased over time. Catch per effort has increased in the summer creel. The harvest composition was broken down by sport, commercial, and tribal components. MN1 supports majority of the sport catch (about 80%). Lake trout restoration has been a success, allowing the discontinuation of stocking in MN3. The purpose of modeling lake trout is to predict abundance and determine what the allowable catch might be in each zone. Ted explained the conceptual framework for the model and how assessments fit in. The various components of mortality were discussed: natural, lamprey and fishing mortality. Participants asked specific questions about mortality rate estimates, assessments that were included in the modeling, and trends in angler pressure and catch rates.

Don addressed stocking and criteria to discontinue lake trout stocking. He explained the role the USFWS has in restoring lake trout to the Great Lakes. Don explained the criteria for discontinuing lake trout stocking: catch per unit effort of larger than 25 inch lake trout, percent wild composition, and stocked fish survival index. He showed the time series of these indices for each zone and then summarized the fulfillment of these criteria. The criteria have been entirely satisfied for each zone, with the exception of stocked fish survival in MN2. He then presented angler catch compositions of stocked and wild lake trout by zone. Don gave some final thoughts about lake trout management. Lake trout rehabilitation has been the overall management goal for Lake Superior by all agencies and much progress has been made. There is still rehabilitation work to be done and the process has taken a long time to get to the present state. The DNR will adopt a conservative approach to management and will not jeopardize current lake trout stocks. He then gave some concluding thoughts on the status of lake trout in Minnesota waters. Summer creel CPE is at an all time high, while assessment CPE has declined. This may indicate a change in behavior related to forage, causing a more aggressive "bite" or reflect a more dispersed prey base that is not as susceptible to near-shore gillnets. Stocks are composed of larger fish, shifting toward more wild fish. He presented some stocking scenarios, which may reduce the number of lake trout stocked by about a third. If the lake trout model shows a significant surplus in a particular management zone, a limited commercial fishery may be considered. Caveats would include discontinuing stocking in zones with commercial fishing, minimizing harvest of spawning sized fish, and not including MN1, at least in the beginning. Allow a regulated harvest of siscowet lake trout if a market developed.

General discussion followed. Lake trout as a long-lived species was talked about. Catch and release of lake trout and hooking mortality was discussed. The status of the lake trout model and when it would provide a basis for a decision was discussed. The question of whether stocking lake trout has been beneficial or not was raised. Growth and age at first maturity in response to commercial fishing was talked about. Lake trout spawning habitat in Minnesota was talked about. The comment was made that lake trout stocking contributes to the sport-fish catch in MN1. The rationale of allowing some commercial take of lake trout at levels that were supported during the recovery phase was raised. The possibility of a commercial menomonee fishery was talked about. The fairness and equitability of sport versus commercial fishing in MN was mentioned. Siscowet commercial marketing was raised as an issue. Lamprey control was discussed. Commercial fishing is popular with the tourist and restaurant industries. The cost for charter fishing on a per hour basis and the retail value of the catch were compared and discussed. The decline in the historical catch of the commercial lake trout fishery was mentioned. There was a comment registered that commercial fishing should be re-instituted in some form, but not close to Duluth where the sport-fish catch is the highest.

Don distributed the response summaries for the lake trout topic and a lamprey brochure. There was agreement that a separate habitat meeting is warranted in June. Jeff Gunderson, MN Sea Grant introduced and distributed a Sea Grant publication that seeks to educate non-professionals in fisheries management techniques. The next meeting will be enforcement and regulations. The meeting was adjourned.