

Summary of Results – Little Falls Area Mail-in Panfish Survey

A mail-in survey of angler attitudes was conducted during the winter of 2012-2013 in the vicinity of Little Falls, in central Minnesota. The purpose of this project was to assess angler attitudes pertaining to potential management options for bluegill in the Little Falls work area. Bluegill are almost certainly the most pursued fish in the Little Falls work area. More than twice as many sunfish are harvested in Minnesota each year (15.6 million) than the second most frequently angled fish, the black crappie (7.0 million). Despite the popularity of sunfish to anglers only two lakes in the work area are managed for sunfish via specialized fishing regulations. Since 1999 DNR Fisheries staff have been conducting spring trap net assessments targeting panfish on many area lakes to more adequately assess sunfish populations and determine if suitable growth, recruitment and mortality characteristics exist to manage for quality within these populations. Spring trap net sampling indicated that several lakes contained fast growing bluegill with fishing harvest probably limiting the abundance of larger fish (over 8 inches).

An initial mailing of 1000 surveys was sent to anglers randomly selected from the 2011 DNR License Bureau database. A total of 554 response cards (56% response rate) were received out of a net total of 997 deliverable surveys. This mail-in survey provided a less biased and more comprehensive evaluation of angler attitudes toward intended management strategies than one could expect from the public meeting process. Bluegill fishing was popular amongst respondents with 94% having pursued sunfish within the past year and 59% pursuing sunfish in excess of 20% of the time. A high percentage of anglers (68%) indicated they had harvested a daily limit of sunfish on at least one occasion within the past year and more than 20% had kept limits on 5 or more occasions. A majority of anglers (54% vs. 46%) felt that fishing pressure was impacting the quality of sunfish they were catching. Respondents were asked whether they supported or opposed three types of specialized regulations aimed at improving bluegill size structure. A copy of the postcard containing the question asked is found below. Angler support exceeded opposition to all three regulation options explored. The most popular option was a restriction of the bag limit to 10 sunfish which garnered 49% support versus 30% opposition. Few respondents indicated needing more than 20 sunfish to provide a meal for their residence. Reducing the bag limit to 10 fish would not be prohibitive to the harvest of a meal of fish when two or more people are fishing together. It may be possible that a 10 fish bag could promote fishing with friends or family members.

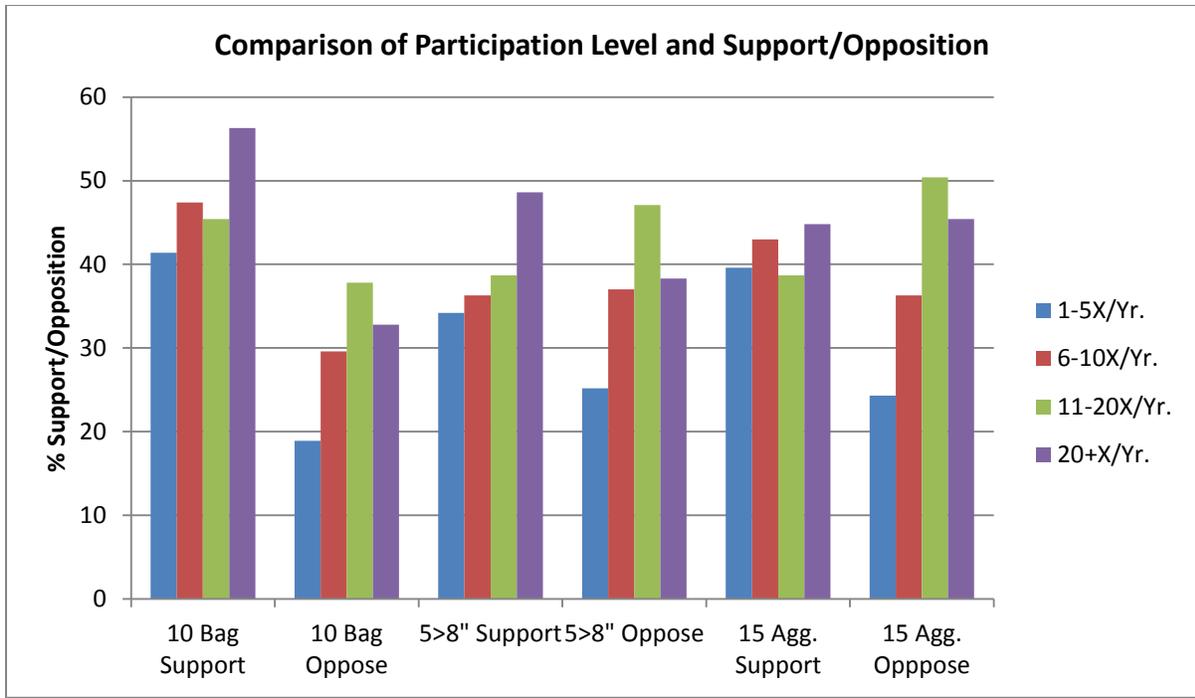


Figure 1. A Vertical bar graph depicting the response percentages of support and opposition of anglers keeping 1-5, 6-10, 11-20 and 20+ limits of bluegill per year.



Figure 2. Pie chart description of the responses to "support for a 10 fish bag limit".

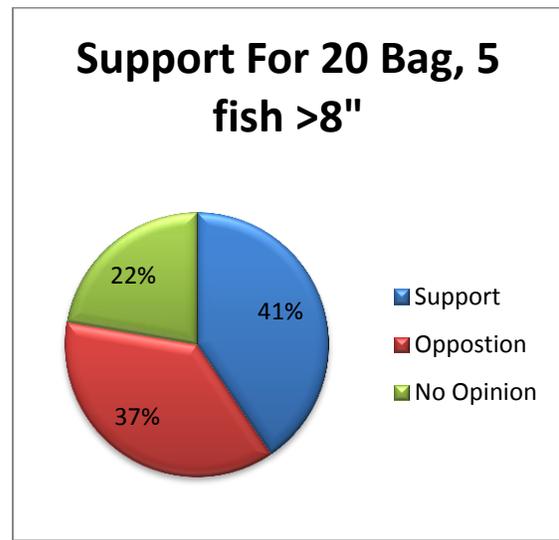


Figure 3. Pie chart description of the responses to "support for a 20 bag, 5 fish >8 inch limit".

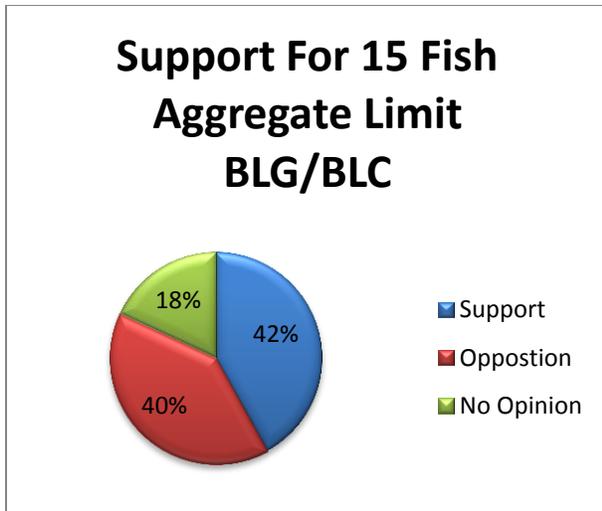


Figure 4. Pie chart description of the responses to "support for a 15 fish aggregate bag limit for bluegill and crappie".

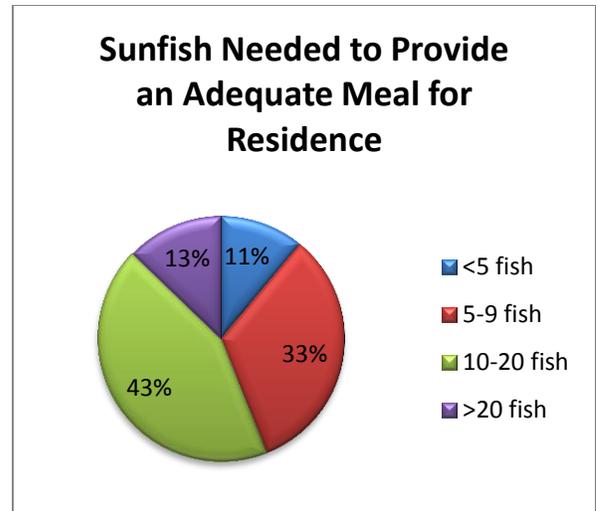


Figure 5. Pie chart description of the responses to the number of sunfish needed to provide an adequate meal for a residence.

Management Implications

Results from this survey illustrated the popularity of sunfish angling in central Minnesota and provided valuable insights into the behaviors, perceptions and opinions of a large cross-section of respondents. Although sunfish have always been considered a “food fish” by most anglers, responses to this survey suggest that harvest restrictions may be supported by a majority of fishermen/women in an effort to improve sunfish size. The most popular regulation option in this survey consisted of a 10 fish daily bag limit for sunfish which has been shown to increase the size structure of bluegill populations in central Minnesota lakes. A significant percentage (68%) of mail in survey responders had harvested at least one limit of sunfish in the past year indicating that a bag limit reduction may be effective in reducing harvest. In moving forward with more intensive management of the sunfish resource in the Little Falls area, implementation of the 10 fish bag limit on suitable candidate lakes appears to be the most palatable option to our constituents. The other two regulation options which were explored in this survey also received significant support from respondents and may be considered as potentially useful in the future. Based on comments received during the mail in and internet surveys, the 10 fish bag was most popular due to its simplicity. The complexity of the other two options probably reduced their favorability. Several respondents indicated that they did not want to measure each sunfish they caught. Sharing survey results with stakeholders will lend transparency to the decision-making process where public trust often

appears compromised by misperceptions about where the public stands on specialized fishing regulations.

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