

Sunfish Toolbox Summary (12/2003)

What is the sunfish toolbox?

The sunfish toolbox was designed to increase the number of quality sunfish fishing opportunities in Minnesota, without adding complexity to the rulebook. The regulation in the toolbox was developed to achieve specific, measurable, and attainable goals, and provide for scientific evaluation of the regulation's effect on fish communities. The reduced number of regulations will make it easier for anglers to remember and comply with the regulations while, at the same time, provide adequate replication for scientific evaluation of their effects on the fish communities

What is the proposed regulation and what are the goals?

Fisheries managers proposed a single regulation beyond the existing statewide sunfish regulation, a five fish possession limit. The goal is to maintain an existing quality sunfish population or to restore a sunfish population having the potential to produce quality-sized (over 8 inches) sunfish, by reducing overall harvest approximately 50% and redistribute harvest in lakes with periodically high fishing pressure.

Lakes that may be considered for this regulation should have a sunfish population meeting the following criteria:

- a. Evidence that the lake produces or has a history of producing large (over 9 inch) sunfish and fast sunfish growth rates (over 1.5 inches/year for 3 yr old sunfish).
- b. Abundant populations of predator species (e.g. largemouth bass, northern pike) to reduce densities of young sunfish.

Will this regulation change a stunted sunfish population to a quality population?

No. Lakes considered for this regulation should currently have a quality population or a population that was historically quality-sized. Changing a stunted sunfish population to a quality-sized population would require a more drastic regulation not included in the toolbox, which, for example, would concentrate angler harvest on small sunfish (less than 6 inches).

What regulations might change a stunted to a quality sunfish population?

The regulation should concentrate angler harvest on small sunfish (less than 6 inches). For example, a protected slot limit of 6-10 inches would concentrate angler harvest on sunfish less than 6 inches and eliminate harvest of all but trophy-sized sunfish, greater than 10 inches.

How long will it take to see results?

For lakes that currently have quality-sized sunfish, the reduced bag limit would maintain the number of quality-sized fish caught, then increase the number of quality-sized sunfish. For lakes with a history of quality-sized fish, but currently dominated by small sunfish, less than 6 inches, with a good growth rates, might reach 8 inches in about 6 years. Sunfish over 8 inches will increase in abundance, as overall harvest is reduced.

Where, when and how many of these regulations will be implemented?

That isn't clear at this time, in part, because DNR staff need time to work with citizens to identify where, when and which toolbox options make sense at the local level. What is known, however, is that each of the DNR's 28 area fisheries managers will be asked to consider these options first when selecting regulations to meet the management needs of that water body. The speed at which regulations are implemented will depend upon public support and the assurance that selected lakes meet the appropriate biological criteria.

Are these regulations permanent?

Not necessarily. Fisheries managers will monitor sunfish populations while the regulation is in place. Should the population show signs of slowed growth, managers will have the opportunity to reassess the use of the regulation.