



Decision that Cormorant Control on Pelican Lake is Not Currently Warranted

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has determined that cormorant population control is not currently warranted at Pelican Lake in Grant County. The decision follows data showing walleye numbers in Pelican Lake improved in 2022 and 2023.

Background

A 2021 fisheries survey indicated that the Egret Island cormorant population may be limiting survival of young (one- and two-year-old) walleyes that are key to producing older age fish.

DNR hosted a public meeting and opened a public comment opportunity on fish and cormorant population management alternatives in August of 2023.

At that time, Minnesota DNR was considering lethal measures to remove a portion of the then growing double-crested cormorant population on Egret Island that may have been having adverse impacts to the Pelican Lake walleye fishery.

The Minnesota DNR also communicated that they would assess several alternatives including revising fish management goals to align with a more sustainable fishery, increasing survey efforts to gain a better understanding of the system, and assess associated potential impacts of lethal control of adult cormorants before making a final decision.

An assessment of new fish and bird survey data from 2022 and 2023 shows some improvements to the walleye fishery and more stable cormorant numbers. Based on this new data, cormorant control on Pelican Lake is not warranted in 2024. The DNR will continue to monitor the situation at this site and birds and fish will be surveyed again in 2024.

2023 Bird and Fish Data Analysis

The gillnet catch rate rebounded to 7.5 walleyes per net in 2023, just below the management plan goal of eight walleyes per net, from 5.3 walleyes per net in 2021. Initial signs suggest strong potential for 2022 and 2023 walleye year-classes. While 11 of the last 13 walleye year-classes have underperformed expected recruitment to the fishery, increased growth and adult survival may be mitigating predation impacts.

Cormorant numbers were slightly higher in 2023 (1675 nests) than in 2021 (1385 nests) and 2022 (1199 nests), but lower than high counts in 2015 and 2020 that exceeded 2000 nests.

Public Input Summary

During the 30-day public input period that included a meeting in Ashby, MN, DNR heard concerns both in favor of and against lethal control of cormorants. Several themes emerged from the comments submitted including:

- Toxicity of lead ammunition is a concern.
- The public values both fish species and bird species.
- Potential for cormorant impacts to people (smell, recreation/tourism), other species (co-nesting birds), and the environment (e.g., water quality and diseases such as swimmer's itch).
- Observations that the cormorant impact is relatively recent (past 5-12 years).
- Concerns regarding the influence birds have on the success of fish stocking.
- Suggestions to allow fish and bird populations to self-regulate.
- Concerns that the research is unclear and additional diet studies and more survey data for both fish and bird species is needed.
- Concerns about consistency with Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) regulations.
- Cost of cormorant control remains a concern.

Next Steps

The DNR has an ongoing commitment to managing fish and cormorant populations at Pelican Lake. The DNR will continue to assess this situation. The DNR will be developing an adaptive monitoring and management plan for the Pelican Lake fishery and Egret Island cormorant colony. An adaptive management plan is a decision process that allows for adjustment of management actions when data and additional factors become better understood. It is a structured, iterative, data-driven process that helps improve future management. This process will identify when management may be warranted and an approach to monitor the outcomes of any management.

References:

[MN DNR cormorant](#) webpage that provides a summary of cormorant information for Minnesota.
[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Environmental Impact Statement](#) that provides background, policy, environmental consequences and an assessments of alternatives.