

Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Committee (MLFAC)

Date: October 15, 2024

Time: 6-8pm

Location: Appledorn's Sunset Bay Resort and virtual

In-person attendance is highly encouraged for committee members

Committee purpose

To advise the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on the State of Minnesota's fisheries management program for Mille Lacs Lake.

Committee members

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Jason Bahr | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bill Eno | <input type="checkbox"/> Curtis Kalk | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tony Roach* |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Justin Baldwin | <input type="checkbox"/> Ryan Fitzpatrick | <input type="checkbox"/> Paul Koering | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Megan Uphoff |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wesley Basset | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dean Hanson* | <input type="checkbox"/> Steve Kulifaj | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mark Utne |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jodi Crowell | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Steve Heiskary | <input type="checkbox"/> Melissa LeBeau | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Laurie Westerlund |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Larry Dahler | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Steven Johnson | <input type="checkbox"/> Peter Perovich | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chris Thury |

DNR staff

- Brad Parsons, Fisheries Section Manager
- Brian Nerbonne, Regional Fisheries Manager
- Greg Berg, Mille Lacs Area Supervisor
- Eric Jensen, Large Lake Specialist
- Kelly Wilder, Policy and Planning Supervisor
- Natalie Haberman, Planner/facilitator

Quick summary

At the October 2024 MLFAC meeting, the DNR reported on the results of recent creel surveys and fall gill netting for walleye, yellow perch, tullibee, smallmouth bass, and northern pike. The DNR then solicited MLFAC members' thoughts and preferences regarding winter walleye regulations. The results of the discussion will assist the DNR in deciding on regulations that would optimize winter angling opportunity while maintaining

robust summer angling opportunities. Additionally, the DNR provided an update on the fall night ban removal and recent discussions with the 1837 bands regarding increased flexibility in setting safe harvest levels and regulations. Finally, the DNR updated members on the timeline for selecting new MLFAC members for 2025.

Meeting notes

1. Welcome (Natalie)

2. Fall netting summary (Eric Jensen)

Eric presented the results of creel surveys up to the current point in the season and preliminary results from fall netting and electro-fishing surveys.

Forage gill nets caught age-0 tullibee at the highest level since 2010 and yellow-perch at the second highest; this helps to explain the decline in angler catch rates for walleye earlier this year, as walleye have had more forage available. Fall electro-fishing results found the top of the age-0 walleye length were the highest observed; however, the median length was below 6-inches. There are a lot of large age-0 fish, which could produce a strong year class that could be seen in two or three years. Eric presented a strong correlation between the spring population estimate and the fall gillnet catch-per-effort results, which gives the DNR confidence in the fall netting survey data presented and its ability to track the abundance of walleye in the lake.

Walleye catch rate from fall gillnets improved from 2023 and is above the 20 pounds/net goal defined by the 1837 Treaty Fisheries Technical Committee (FTC). The top of the age-0 walleye length range was over 9-inches, which is larger than average. Additionally, range and nets sampled a high number of age-2 and age-3 fish approaching maturity. For all gill nets, there was a larger number of mature males caught than females, however, females composed a larger portion of the spawning stock biomass because of their larger size compared to males.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- Where did the 20-pound mark come from?
 - Brad: Somewhere in the middle of the range of pounds per net from the early 2000s. When we had four bad year classes in a row starting in 2010, FTC members thought 20 pounds per net was something we could attain. It was an agreed upon benchmark based on historical data where catch-per-effort at and above that level is indicative of a healthy walleye population.
- Does that impact attitudes on negotiation?
 - Brad: Annual gill netting is just one input into the statistical model the DNR uses that is the most reliable measure of the walleye population. Gill net catches can fluctuate because of other factors in the lake that influence catchability of walleye in nets.
 - Eric: Gill net data can signal when there is an issue but is not ultimately reliable on its own. For example, we had low catchability in 2023, but those data didn't stand out when they went through the model. This year's net catches are strong, but the model may not reflect a

population level increase. Having net catches above 20 pounds is one helpful metric when working with FTC on setting the safe harvest level.

- Is the 20-pounds still a good gauge of a healthy fishery, or should it be lower based on the current carrying capacity of the lake?
 - Brad: The 20-pound benchmark was based off the catch-per-effort numbers from 2002 to 2017, so it accounts for the water clarity changes that lowered the lake's carrying capacity that occurred in the late 90s, and for zebra mussels, which peaked in 2012.

Eric then discussed the walleye condition factor observed in fall gill nets. The DNR has developed a standard for Mille Lacs using data from 1986-2002 that measures the expected weight of a fish at a given length, or its "plumpness." Gill net results are above the median, demonstrating there is good forage for larger fish, which explains lower angler catch rates seen this year.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- Is condition factor only used to explain and predict angler catch rates? Could condition factor also be an indication of prey availability that could inform the harvestable surplus?
 - Eric/Brian: Poor body condition, indicating low forage, could be one rationale for fishing down the population. However, we would not adjust our estimate of the harvestable surplus based on one year of low forage.
- Your median condition factor was calculated using a period of relatively high harvest; is it still valid?
 - Brad: The consistent standard helps us compare from year to year, but we may need to adjust our expectations of how frequently the lake exceeds it.
 - Eric: Fish in good condition will be better egg layers, which will increase competition, and lead to skinnier fish with a better bite. If we increase harvest, there will be less competition, and the bite will get worse.

Eric then presented on yellow perch, tullibee, and northern pike results from fall gill netting. There are good numbers of yellow perch in sizes anglers target. For tullibee, the forage gill nets showed the highest catch of age-0 tullibee that has been observed. The age-0 tullibee were not observed in the 2024 standard gill nets as they were too small to be caught in the larger mesh sizes. If this year class persists into next fall, there could be a spike in age-1 tullibee in the 2025 standard gill nets. The periodic spikes in abundance the DNR has observed every four to six years in standard gill nets is the result of strong year classes of age-1 fish recruitment, as they are then large enough to be caught in the standard nets. The last prominent spike of age-1 tullibee the DNR observed in the standard gill nets was in 2015 from the 2013- and 2014-year classes. If the age-0 tullibee maintain its population, we will observe a new spike in age-1 tullibee next fall. For northern pike, gill netting results showed increasing pike abundance in recent years, although still relatively low compared to most lakes.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- What length do yellow perch start to spawn?
 - Eric: Males begin to spawn at the 4.5-5-inch range. Females begin to spawn past the 7-inch range.
- Why did tullibee spike this year?

- Eric: Likely the spike was caused by increased productivity in the lower trophic levels of the food web. Conditions were warm to start this year but then got cold and rainy. Conditions over a long enough time left food (zooplankton) available in their size range. Prompts a good year class. Rain, runoff, and wind all go to nutrient levels and relates to trophic levels.
- You don't think it was a larger number of juveniles were produced, but that those that were hatched were survived better?
 - Eric: The spring conditions likely allowed it to develop. Evidence from other systems for fish exhibiting low population abundance suggests that it may be advantageous for mature females to postpone spawning until they're even bigger. However, we appear to be past that stage with the Mille Lacs tullibee population.
 - Brian asked a MLFAC member to share his theory: A lot of spring runoff helped. Lakes had almost no snow and little ice, and we were surprised at how much vegetation was standing at opener. The abundance of cabbage and milfoil is a contributing factor. Water has been dirty all year.
- How are you gill netting around the milfoil? For example, the Garrison reef is so thick, there is no way you could put a net there.
 - Eric: We experienced challenges on the north shore of Mille Lacs and had to pull the nets off the break because of the thick milfoil.
- What about big blows with eel grass and milfoil dying off?
 - Eric: That didn't seem to happen this year. The first week we started netting was calm, and the second week was windy and found that in the nets. Fish aren't bothered by it.
- If northern pike are increasing and there is low harvest, would you consider simplifying the regulations to encourage more harvest?
 - Eric: The trophy component is important to maintain. If members bring forward a suggestion, we will look into it.
 - Brad: We had a more expansive regulation a few years ago and people still didn't harvest them.
- I have seen the increase in northern pike, yet I barely catch any pike in comparison to other fisheries.
 - Brian: If you look at the increase more closely, the overall number of pike in the lake isn't high compared to other lakes.

3. Winter walleye regulation discussion (Brian Nerbonne)

Prior to the winter walleye regulation discussion, a MLFAC member presented harvest data analysis from the last five years and highlighted that the state's allocation of harvest has been under the safe harvest level for the last five years. Additional discussion from MLFAC members included sentiment that regulations are too restrictive, concerns with the decrease in angling hours and impact to businesses, and frustration around the decision-making process for the 2024 walleye regulations.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- Why didn't the DNR have time this year to change the regulation after seeing that harvest and pressure were low? You predicted Mille Lacs would have 25% more anglers this year than last year, but this didn't happen.

- Brian: We used a set of assumptions based on past observations that this regulation led to higher pressure; however, the lake is unpredictable. We do plan to continue to leverage contingency regulations and are working to make that process faster.
- It's challenging when we are under the safe harvest level but don't benefit from it. We are told that it will be compensated the next year.
 - Brian: It is true that fish left in the lake are accounted for in the following year's estimates, but the 1837 bands understand this challenge. We are working on improving the framework and allowing greater flexibility.
- When the DNR sets regulations, the goal is to avoid an unplanned closure. However, we would prefer to take more fish in May and June rather than wait until August and September.
 - Brad: The preference for increased late summer and fall harvest over spring harvest was the prominent recommendation in past years. We hear that this preference is shifting to spring and early summer harvest.
- Does the DNR still need to give a 60-day notice if it is tightening the regulation?
 - Brian: This is laid out in the protocols. We can make a more conservative regulation change relatively quickly for the purpose of preventing us from exceeding the safe harvest level.
- Then the regulations should be set more liberally and pulled back when needed.

Brian then led a discussion to gain input regarding winter walleye regulations. DNR predicted that the increased forage would lower catch rates this winter and recommends keeping regulations consistent rather than changing them drastically from season to season. He shared two starting points for discussion for the winter 2024/2025 bag limit – keeping the two-fish limit or reducing to one.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- Based on that prediction, I hope the DNR can choose more expansive regulations next year.
 - Brian: We don't have to keep the same regulations in winter and spring. However, we want to avoid sending a confusing message to the public on the status of the fishery if regulations fluctuate too broadly.
- The options presented seem general, are there any specific examples of how these would play out?
 - Brian: For one fish, this could be one over 20-inches or 18-inches, any size and would provide an opportunity to bring home a fish. For two fish, this could be 18-20 inches. The current size structure includes abundant fish in the 18–23-inch range. Need to consider if we want to keep harvesting the 2013-year class that are mostly bigger than 20-inches or let them grow larger.
- Are we limited to 18-inches or above or is it possible to go under 18-inches?
 - Brian: I don't think we should go below 18-inches. Females haven't matured at that length, and we would be taking fish before they add to spawning stock biomass.
- Can you define "recovered"? What are the criteria?
 - Brian: One criterion is 20-pounds per gill net in the DNR survey. This is part of what we discuss at the FTC, but the population models are the main focus.
- Is it possible to set a regulation that outlines a goal of harvesting a set number of pounds by a set date? Spring ice is unpredictable and it's difficult to manage with that in mind.

- Brian: It's hard for the public to have regulations that potentially change several times in a season. In the winter, we have less creel data that makes changing the regulations difficult because we have less harvest data.
- The winter harvest doesn't fluctuate much, could set two or three fish at 18 – 20-inches. Right now, the surface temps are still high, and we may not have ice in time, meaning catch rates will be lower than most winters. Support keeping at least two fish this winter.
- I support the one over 20-inch suggestion. Many bigger walleyes are cannibalizing smaller fish.
- I appreciated Brian coming out to the bait shop to talk to everyday anglers this summer. People were happy to see the slot. Positive impact on businesses. Businesses were also more profitable when the limit increased to two fish.
- If the bite will be slow this winter, a two-bag limit between 18 – 21-inches is preferred. A one bag limit will not bring anglers.
- Discussion wrapped up with a consensus among MLFAC members for a two fish bag limit and a recommended harvest slot of 18-21 inches.

4. Update on fall night ban (Brian)

Brian provided an update on the status of the fall night fishing ban. The DNR wants to end the fall night ban and is bringing a proposal to the 1837 bands and will propose to change the regulation next year. Would eliminate the night ban in future years after September 1.

5. Management discussions with 1837 bands (Brad Parsons)

Brad provided an update on management discussions with the 1837 bands and discussed that the DNR is looking into options that would allow for more flexibility with setting a safe harvest level. This could include changing the timeline from an annual framework to a multi-year framework.

MLFAC members asked the following questions:

- It would be helpful if the DNR could make an adjustment by early July because it would have a good understanding of harvest by this time.
 - Brian: That's in our control already, we need to look at that for this year.
- Can you provide more details on what the triggers are next season?
 - Brian: Yes, we heard that from members with the contingency regulations. We will give you more input next season.
- It would be nice to have a trigger that would reduce the harvest level and go both ways if needed.
 - Brian: We need to be careful if we manage solely based on contingency regulations. Hard for anglers to plan fishing trips if regulations are changing a lot.
- The DNR should pick a date for contingency regulations to be compared to actual harvest to expectations and implement it if the threshold is met. We know historically what percentage of the harvest occurs by certain points in the season.
 - Brian: The 60-day notice requirement makes contingency regulations challenging. Important for us to get more flexibility, whether that is an overage plan or multi-year framework.
- The multi-year framework had issues before. The lake was shut down immediately when we went over.

- Brian: We want to make this more flexible. Needs to be a reasonable amount the state can go over and adjust from there.
- In the fall, if we're below harvest, could there be a trigger that it opens to three or four fish?
 - Brian: We did that this year with increasing to two fish, which was well received by anglers.
- For upcoming discussions, I encourage you to discuss the 20-pound net margin. Down to 13 is when you get record year class. When you use the arbitrary 20-pound number, it seems wrong to use that as the goal.
 - Brad: We never agreed on what actions to take in response to being below 20 pounds. We hear that we should get rid of the 20-pound number.

6. 2025 Fish and Wildlife advisory groups recruitment update (Natalie)

Natalie provided an update on the 2025 Fish and Wildlife advisory groups recruitment process. The DNR will begin reviewing applications in October and will then gain approval from DNR leadership on selected applicants early this winter. Natalie requested MLFAC members to reach out to the DNR if they plan on stepping down for the 2025 term as staff begin reviewing applications to solidify the number of open seats.

7. Public comment

One audience member provided the following comment at the conclusion of the meeting:

- Since 2005 I have seen the lake go downhill, hard to make a living. When you raised the limit to two, seems like it helped the local economy. The people who live up here and are retired want to catch fish. People going to other lakes instead like Leech and Cass. Used to be like that here. Want to know how the businesses make it.