

Hooked on Mille Lacs Lake

New Regulations

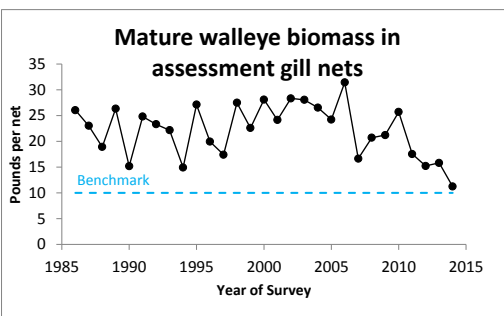
By Rick Bruesewitz
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New regulations at Mille Lacs have certainly become commonplace. We learned in the last decade that keeping regulations the same for long periods of time may not be as feasible as we once thought.

2015 is not going to be breaking that pattern either. Regulations for walleye and northern pike were modified out of concerns for the future of the fishery.

Walleye

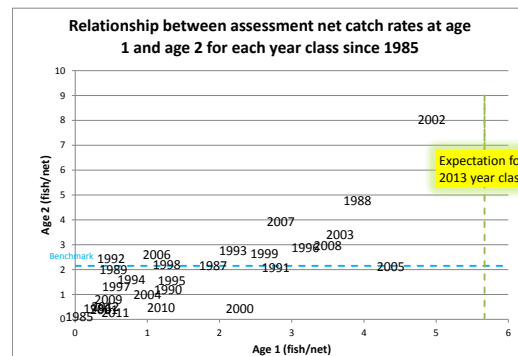
In the chart below you can see how our index of total spawning stock of walleye has declined to the lowest level since we have been recording information on the sex of walleye. While we expect it to increase in the assessment next September, we do not want it to continue the same downward trend that we've seen since 2010. With that in mind, a lower limit "benchmark" for Mille Lacs ma-



ture walleye biomass was set. Assessment catches below the benchmark will trigger catch-and-release only fishing for anglers, and ceremonial fishing only for the eight Chipewawa Bands in 2016.

Protecting the 2013 year class is critical. While the 2013 year class is looking very

strong, it was agreed that if this year class is not at least at a median level in the 2015 assessment nets, this too would trigger catch-and-release only angling, and ceremonial fishing for Bands in 2016. Given the 2013 year class was the most abundant year class that we've observed at age 1, it is unlikely for this to occur. However, it was important that we ensure recruitment is considered. If the catch rate of the 2013 year class is less than 2.15,



then it will be an even longer road to recovery than anticipated.

With these benchmarks in mind, the safe harvest level for 2015 was set at 40,000 pounds total walleye kill (28,600 pounds is the State's allocation). This level is similar to what was actually taken in 2014 by the combined effort of anglers and band members. This level of harvest is expected to allow male spawning biomass to increase substantially in 2016 (due to earlier maturation of males of the 2013 year class), while also resulting in no decline in female spawning biomass.

So how did we come up with these regulations? From past experience we have seen that winter catch rates are a good predictor of the open water season. With 2014 regula-

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Current Mille Lacs Fishing Regulations:
<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/fishing/millelacs.html>

Regs at a Glance:

• **Walleye**

1 fish limit. Fish must be 19-21", or 28" or longer.

• **Northern Pike**

10 fish limit. No more than one 30" or longer, and you must have two fish under 30" in immediate possession (taken same trip) before harvesting one 30" or longer. Darkhouse spearing allowed. Angling season runs through March 27, 2016.

• **Bass**

Season opens and closes with walleye. 6 fish limit. No more than one small-mouth bass over 18".

• **Tullibee**

10 fish limit

• **Muskellunge**

1 fish limit. New Statewide 54" minimum size begins this year.

• **Other species**

Follow statewide regulations.

• **Night Closure:**

10 PM—6 AM. Beginning 10 PM, Monday, May 11, and running through 12:01 AM Dec 1, with the following two exceptions beginning June 8th during night closure:

1) **Musky angling**—Musky may be targeted with artificial lures longer than 8" or sucker minnows longer than 8". No possession or use of other baits or tackle. No possession or targeting of species other than muskellunge.

2) **Bowfishing for rough fish**—No possession of angling equipment, and only rough fish may be in possession.

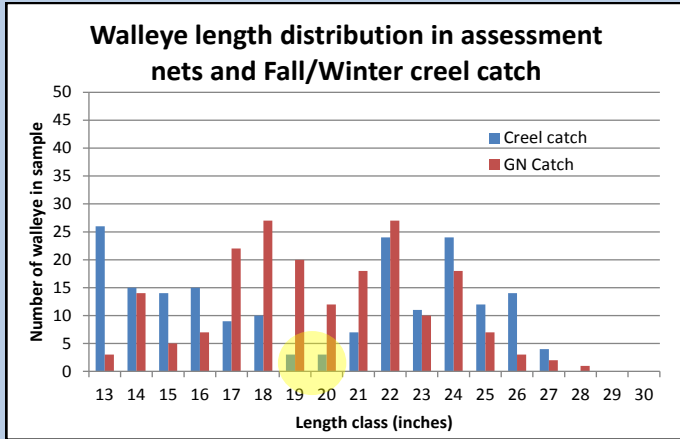
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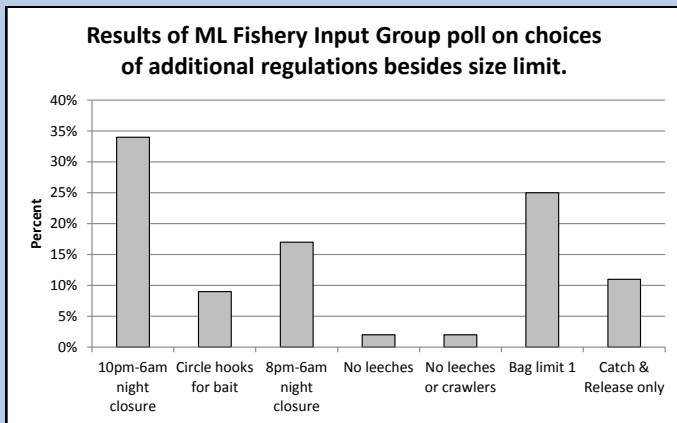
New Regulations, continued

tions, harvest and hooking mortality were expected to be around 60,000 pounds. Since the State's allocation is 28,600 pounds, harvest would need to be reduced by about 1/2. When examining the angling catch size distribution from late fall and winter, it appeared that fewer fish were being caught that were 19 or 20 inches long (highlighted area on chart). This results in a significant savings, but not enough to reduce



total angler kill by one-half. Therefore additional measures were still needed to get the kill down to a level that had a lower chance of triggering a mid-season change to catch-and-release.

At the Mille Lacs Fishery Input Group meeting that was held at the end of February, we queried the group to find out what other measures would be least objectionable. We put forth options for various night closures, a one fish limit, a circle hook requirement for live bait, bait restrictions, and

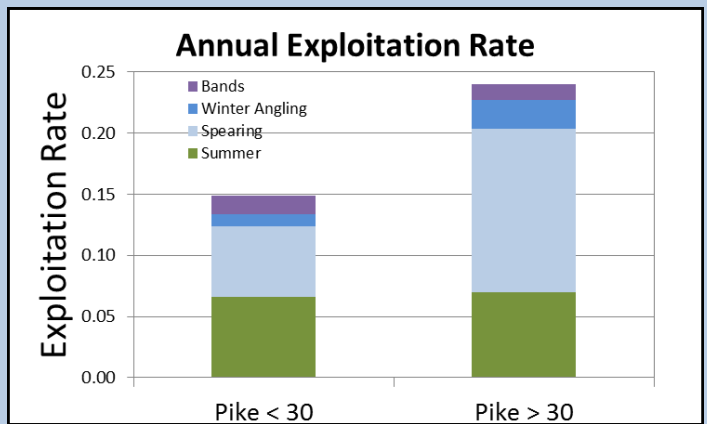


additionally a catch-and-release only option suggested by an input group member. Overall, the bait and lure restrictions, catch-and-release only, and an 8PM-6PM night closure were

the most objectionable. Therefore, in order to assure a low chance of mid-season catch-and-release, the one fish limit and a season long night closure (with provisions to allow musky fishing and bowfishing at night) were selected to accompany the 19-21" or 28" and over harvest slot.

Pike

Northern pike regulations were also modified due to concerns for excessive harvest of larger pike. While we first considered standard length-based regulations, a member of the input group suggested an "Earn A Trophy" regulation that required the harvest of smaller pike before being able to harvest a larger pike. Evaluations of the creel survey data suggested that this may work to reduce the harvest of big pike while also increasing the harvest of small pike, which is an objective of our management.



Smallmouth Bass

Although there are no changes in bass regulations, I thought I'd mention why we did not entertain any changes.

Anglers caught over 80,000 smallmouth bass last year, and yet harvested just 3,800. This was the highest harvest we have seen; however, in relation to their abundance, harvest was still very low. Basically, harvest of bass has not kept pace with the increase in abundance. Since harvest was low, and since exploitation was low, and since the population is still very high, no changes were made to bass regulations.

Please visit the Mille Lacs Management web page for more information at <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/millelacs/index.html>.

