MEETING MINUTES
Minnesota 1837 Ceded Territory Fisheries Committee
10:00 a.m. August 3, 2026
Eddy's Resort, 41334 Shakopee Lake Rd, Onamia

1. **Agenda Approval and Introductions**
    a. Review/modification of agenda

The agenda was reviewed and a sign-in sheet was circulated. An agenda item was added to begin discussion about funding for the next Mille Lacs mark-recapture population estimate.

ATTENDEES: Mark Luehring (GLIFWC), Susan Klapel (Mille Lacs Band), Kelly Applegate (Mille Lacs Band), Keith Wiggins (Mille Lacs Band), Jaylyn Labine (Mille Lacs Band) Erin Lunda (MN DNR), Kevin McDonnel (MN DNR), Patrick Schmalz (MN DNR), Eric Jensen (MN DNR), Greg Berg (MN DNR), Nate Painovich (MN DNR), Brad Parsons (MN DNR), Eric Torvinen (Fond du Lac Band), Adam Ray (GLIFWC), Brandon Byrne (GLIFWC)

2. **2026 Spring Band Harvest Summary (GLIFWC)**

A summary of the tribes' spring harvest was distributed (attachment 1). In addition, as requested previously, graphs showing tribal walleye harvest by landing were presented (attachment 2).

- To date, tribal harvest of walleye is 19,321 fish weighing a total of 55,329.1 pounds. Tribal harvest of northern pike is 2,355 fish weighing a total of 10,018.8 pounds. Tribal harvest of yellow perch is 5,003 fish weighing a total of 4,201.2 pounds.
- Cedar Creek, Liberty Beach, and North Garrison landings consistently see the highest tribal harvest.
    - There was some discussion about how far tribal harvesters travel from the landings. It varies by conditions (ice, wind/weather), tribe, and landing.
    - Time series plots of walleye harvest by landing will continue to be produced.
- It was noted that the harvest season went very well, although there were some abnormalities in how the season progressed. One example is that northern pike harvest was higher than normal. This was not likely the result of increased targeted northern pike effort, but instead a combination of higher abundance, the seasonal progression in temperatures, and some notably high single-day catches.
    - It was noted that the harvested northern pike looked healthy, and that some of them had tullibee in stomachs.

3. **2026 Mille Lacs Angler Harvest Update (MNDNR**)

- A table of the 2026 angling creel survey through July 15 was distributed (attachment 3), and a summary was presented.
- Total angling effort for the open water season through July 15 is estimated at 280,357 hours, up 9% from 2025. Effort during the July 1-15 creel period was 42% higher than the same period in 2025.
    - It was noted that while effort through July 15 is higher, effort during the early open water season (through June 15) lower in 2026, despite fishing being better in 2026. It was

speculated that weather conditions, particular strong winds, early in the season may have contributed to lower effort.
    - Observations from creel clerks suggest that walleye fishing has slowed down recently.
- Total walleye harvest through July 15 is estimated at 21,509 fish weighing 58,759 pounds. There has been an estimated 3,921 fish weighing 7,646 pounds of post-release mortality for a total of 25,430 fish weighing 66,405 pounds of total walleye take (harvest plus post-release mortality). This total take is 63% of the state's share of the walleye safe harvest.
    - Several walleyes in the 10-12 inch range are being reported caught and released by anglers.
    - Walleyes in the 17-20 inch range make up the bulk of angler harvested walleyes.
- Yellow perch harvest during the open water season has been low. Total harvest through July 15 is estimated at 42,978 fish weighing 32,113 pounds, which is 88% of the state's share of the total harvest quota. It is expected that yellow perch harvest will remain low through the end of the 2026 fishing season.
- Northern pike harvest plus post-release mortality has been low during the open water season, although recent high water temperatures have contributed to some increased post-release mortality. Through July 15 an estimated 1,111 northern pike weighing 4,188 pounds have been harvested. An additional 199 fish weighing 899 pounds were estimated to have died post-release for an estimated total take of 1,310 northern pike weighing 5,087 pounds.
- No tullibee or burbot harvest has been encountered during the open-water angling season.
- Smallmouth bass fishing has been good and the population appears to be doing very well. Anglers have caught and released an estimated 89,539 fish weighing 306,917 pounds.
- Anglers satisfaction is good with the better catch rates and 3-bag walleye regulation.

4. State angler Walleye regulations for the remainder of the season – (MNDNR)

- At the recent meeting of the Mille Lacs Fishery Advisory Committee, members were happy with how the fishing season has gone. They were particularly pleased with the 3-bag for walleye and the resulting higher proportion of the state's share of safe harvest being taken
- There are currently no plans to change angling regulations for any species for the remainder of the open-water season.
- There was discussion about increases in northern pike abundance over time and if there is a need to further consider how that increased pike abundance affects the lake's balance and potential effects on other species.
    - It was noted that northern pike harvest is low all across the state and that regardless of regulations, anglers do not harvest substantial numbers of pike.
    - The only recent increase in angling harvest of northern pike at Mille Lacs was during the first year after removal of the northern pike spearing ban. However, most of that increase was from the spearing of large northern pike.
    - The current northern pike angling regulation at Mille Lacs is a 30-in maximum length limit with a 5 fish limit. In addition, the season remains open past the walleye season closure to

provide opportunity during late ice fishing. Late ice northern pike fishing is popular at Lake of the Woods, but does not appear to be popular at Mille Lacs.

- It was also noted that despite the increase in abundance at Mille Lacs, overall northern pike abundance is low relative to high density populations elsewhere, and the pike population biomass is low relative to walleye.
- It is still important to monitor northern pike populations and encourage northern pike harvest.

5. 2026 Spring Electrofishing Survey for Juvenile Walleye in Mille Lacs Lake (GLIFWC)

- A summary report of the GLIFWC spring juvenile walleye survey was circulated and reviewed.
  - Sampling was conducted at sites 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8.
- Approximately 900 juvenile walleye were captured in the survey. Fish were larger and more widely distributed than last year with more fish around 8 inches sampled.
- There was some discussion about sampling conditions and how those affect catch rates. Challenging weather conditions, staff electrofishing experience, and differences among electrofishing boats all likely affect catch rates in most years suggesting caution in directly comparing catch rates between years, however there is still value in the survey to evaluate overwinter survival of juvenile walleyes (particularly age-0).
- The 2025 year class of walleyes were small in the fall electrofishing survey as age-0 and were still small in spring as age-1. The fall 2026 surveys will provide more clarity on the status of the 2025 year class.
- It was noted that forage availability has improved in the lake. The 2024 year class has reached a size that it can now prey upon small tullibee and age-0 yellow perch.
- There was additional discussion about the value of additional indicators of walleye abundance.
  - Specifically the value of spring tribal harvest catch rates as an early indicator of mature walleye abundance was discussed.
  - Catch per gill net is easily calculated.
  - The value of calculating spearing catch per hour was also discussed.

6. Data Exchange and Review

a. Mille Lacs Lake – creel report and large lake report (MNDNR)

- MN DNR emailed the 2025 final creel and survey reports for Mille Lacs in advance of the meeting.

b. Other Lakes – creel report and summer assessments (MNDNR)

- For other lakes in the 1837 Ceded Territory, there were likely no creel surveys conducted in 2025, but MN DNR will verify. MN DNR now has a statewide creel survey database that will likely allow for easier summary of creel surveys in the future. Summer assessment reports will be prepared and exchanged prior to the January meeting so that quotas can be updated with recent survey data.

7. Yellow Perch subcommittee updates

- The yellow perch subcommittee will plan to update mortality rate estimates including the 2026 fall gillnet survey data.
- The tribes have been pursuing a consultant to update the yellow perch SCAA model. MN DNR noted that they were also working internally on developing a research project on stock assessment model options for Mille Lacs yellow perch. There may be some overlap with any consultant work. Discussions will continue in the yellow perch subcommittee.
- There was discussion of how the yellow perch harvest at age data are compiled and how to update it so that the yellow perch virtual population analysis can be updated with the most recent data. Of particular interest is to see whether increased assessment catch rates on yellow perch provide a signal in the VPA.

8. Modelling subcommittee updates

- Erin Lunda (MN DNR) presented initial results of a modeling subcommittee pilot project to demonstrate the use of expert elicitation to inform walleye exploitation rates for decision-tree categories (i.e., different walleye population status).
    - One of the goals of such an approach would be to make the walleye quota setting the decision process more visual and transparent; to support the process we already use.
    - Modeling subcommittee experts completed a structured elicitation workbook that captured their full judgement and uncertainty when developing exploitation rates.
    - Part 1 of the workbook was category-based elicitation which asked the group what their full judgment range of population categories was (lowest, highest, best-estimate) along with confidence. Differences existed between the two groups, but a shared structure and pattern was noted.
    - Part 2 was function elicitation and asked experts to sketch how exploitation rate should change across the full range of stock status. This revealed a shared sigmoidal shape between the groups and differences were highlighted where each group believed the exploitation threshold should be.
    - Meta-analysis produced combined exploitation rate estimates for both category and continuous status scores, making areas of agreement and divergence between state and tribal experts visible.
    - The group discussed inconsistent interpretations of the population-category framework, underscoring the need to clarify definitions and making sure we have a shared conceptual model moving forward.
    - The committee agreed that we should proceed with the expert elicitation meta-analysis and include those who want to be involved in an update in October. Additional experts to include will be identified and those names will be provided to Erin. They will then be given the workbook to complete with a workshop (virtual or at the October meeting) to provide background and instructions.
- Kevin McDonnell (MNDNR) presented an update on analyses being conducted by the Minnesota Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Minnesota (Lynn Waterhouse and Jeremiah Shrovnal).
    - Jeremiah's work has been focused on determining if walleye productivity has declined at Mille Lacs, and if so, when that change may have occurred. This is a continuation of work initiated by Tom Jones (retired MN DNR) and the modeling subcommittee.

- One approach estimated Ricker stock-recruit relationships using a latent break-point approach. The results suggest a change in the stock-recruit relationship around 2009, after which the stock-recruit relationship estimates fewer recruits per spawner. This approach relies on output from the SCAA model, but the uncertainty in those parameter estimates were allowed to propagate through this analysis.
- Jeremiah also created a Schaefer surplus production model that also included a change point approach (i.e., assumed that productivity changed). These results also suggested two productivity regimes that were roughly the same as the periods defined by the stock-recruit analysis (pre- and post-2008).
    - Of note is that this analysis uses only mature female walleyes. The surplus production model should be updated to include all mature walleyes because tribal harvest is primarily mature males.
    - Jeremiah also provided examples of Kobe plots for the group to assess the past and current status (in reference to fishing mortality and SSB) of the fishery. These plots however did not include male fish, which is a large component of total harvest fishery. Kevin will work with Jeremiah to update this analysis with both sexes to make interpretation easier.
- There was discussion on how to use the results of these analyses.
    - Both analyses provided additional evidence that the Mille Lacs Lake ecosystem moved into a new productivity regime following the introduction of spiny water flea and zebra mussels.
    - Both analyses showed that total walleye productivity has declined relative to historic (pre-2008/9) levels.
    - Pending updates to the surplus production model to include males, these results provide an answer to a question that the parties have debated for several years regarding whether walleye productivity has declined.
    - This can help inform decisions on future walleye management.

- Jeremiah has also successfully fit Lotka-Volterra predator-prey models to walleye and yellow perch data.
    - These results demonstrate that walleye and perch population dynamics appear to have a cyclic nature that is related to one another. It should be noted that this is a pretty simple model that makes several assumptions (e.g. single prey, single predator system).
    - This work may help the FTC frame expectations when it comes to balancing walleye and perch objectives.

9. Walleye harvest regulations discussion (MNDNR)

- To protect the 2013 year class, "small fish friendly" approaches have been applied to walleye harvest management. The principles considered in the approach included: 1) letting fish grow to mature size; 2) letting fish spawn at least once; and 3) protecting large spawners. All of these principles are supported in the fisheries literature. Specific regulatory approaches have included increased tribal spearing effort, and angling regulations that include minimum size limits, small harvest slot limits, catch and release only, and walleye angling closures.
- Anglers desire to have an opportunity to harvest walleyes smaller than the minimum sizes that have been implemented in the past.

- MN DNR contends that the walleye population is stronger now than it was when the strong 2013 year class was produced. MN DNR is concerned about: 1) density-dependent effects on growth and maturity of the 2024 year class; and 2) that we are missing out on harvest opportunity to protect the 2024 year class to maturity.
    - It was noted that the tribes do not view high recruitment as potentially problematic.
- At current, it appears that the MLFAC (and anglers) are more open to complex angling regulations to take advantage of harvest opportunity.
- There was discussion on the use of minimum length limits for walleyes in other states.
    - It was noted that the state of South Dakota has recently developed new walleye toolbox regulations that remove minimum length limits due to concerns about fish stacking up below minimum lengths when year classes are large.
    - On the other hand, the state of Wisconsin has noted walleye population struggles in lakes without minimum length limits.
- It was recognized that wise management decisions based on science and cultural considerations helped improve the walleye population to where it is today. It was additionally noted that harvest regulation is one of things we can control.
- It was suggested that we continue educating anglers about reduced productivity at Mille Lacs and set realistic expectations for the walleye population and fishery.

10. Updates on Management and Research Activities

a. Ogaa Spawning Site Fidelity paper update (GLIFWC)

- The walleye spawning site fidelity project that was part of Kayla Lenz' graduate work has been published in Frontiers in Fish Science.
- Results of acoustic telemetry analyses show that there are key areas that walleye return to spawn.
- The research has received some popular press. Kayla was interviewed by Minnesota Public Radio in Brainerd.
- Additionally there have been some initial discussions on how to use the information to better manage walleyes at Mille Lacs.
    - GLIFWC is interested in learning about aquatic plant management permits being issued on Mille Lacs, particularly those that apply copper sulfate.
    - There has been some investigation about how to potentially designate and protect the areas.
- MN DNR will provide contact information for APM permit staff to GLIFWC.

b. Walleye in our hands update (GLIFWC)

- Fliers created as part of the "Walleye in our hands" project were shared (attachment). The project is a collaboration among several agencies. GLIFWC staff have been distributing the fliers across northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

c. Rum River outlet structure (MN DNR)

- Extremely low water during the spring of 2026 resulted in the stranding of several suckers and northern pike as they moved out of Mille Lacs into the Rum River by going over the Rum River outlet structure.

- Staff from Mille Lacs Band Natural Resources and MN DNR spent time trying to save stranded fish by returning them to the water.
- The issue resulted in several calls and emails to the Garrison office.
- There was a discussion about what options may be available to help prevent similar issues in the future. Those solutions included: 1) using grates from the old trap to keep fish in the lake so they will seek out other spawning areas. 2) modification of the structure to divert fish to the deepest water when it is low. It was decided that MN DNR and Mille Lacs staff will work on developing a response protocol.

d. Management research activities?

- To maintain the 'every five year' frequency, the next walleye mark-recapture population estimate would need to be conducted in 2028.
- A muskellunge mark-recapture population estimate will be conducted at Lake Vermilion in 2027 and 2028, which will take a lot of the field help that would normally be used at Mille Lacs, so it may be prudent to postpone the Mille Lacs work until spring 2029.
- There was some discussion about potential alternative funding options for the mark-recapture estimate. Specific options included LCCMR and other tribal grant opportunities.
- The committee will revisit the timing of the mark-recapture study at a future meeting.

11. Summer and Fall 2026 Survey Plans

a. MNDNR Assessments in Mille Lacs and Other Lakes

- The open water creel survey will continue through October 31.
- The Mille Lacs area staff will be going out with Tyler Ahrenstorff to evaluate the potential to use forward-facing sonar to evaluate forage.
- Monthly water samples will be collected through the end of the season.
- The standard fall survey work will begin in September, with forage netting and electrofishing the first two weeks of the month followed by the standard gillnet assessment.

b. GLIFWC Assessments in Mille Lacs and Other Lakes

- There will be one more retrieval of acoustic receivers and fall electrofishing will be conducted.
- The committee discussed coordinating electrofishing locations to avoid overlap.

12. Next Meeting

- After discussing multiple options for meeting dates at the end of October and in early November, it was decided that DNR will look at availability in Duluth on November 4. The backup date will be November 2.