Minnesota 1837 Ceded Territory Fisheries Committee
Meeting Minutes
9:00 a.m. November 5, 2024
Microsoft Teams Virtual Meeting

Participants: DNR: Brad Parsons, Brian Nerbonne, Patrick Schmalz, Kevin McDonnell, Greg Berg, Eric Jensen, Tom Jones; Mille Lacs Band: Carl Klimah, Kelly Applegate, Fond du Lac Band: Eric Torvinen; GLIFWC: Alexandra Bohman, Adam Ray, Mark Luehring, Aaron Shultz; Voigt Task Force: Henry Bearheart; Consultant: John Hoenig; Guests (University of MN): Lynn Waterhouse, Levi Suchla

1. Welcome and Introductions

Congratulations to Joe Dan Rose (GLIFWC) on his retirement. Mark Luehring will be replacing Joe Dan as the GLIFWC Inland Fisheries Section Leader. Joe Dan will continue to participate in the 1837 Fisheries Committee.

2. Agenda Approval

The agenda was reviewed and approved with no changes.

3. Harvest Updates

*Updates from DNR and GLIFWC were sent to participants via email prior to the meeting.
Through September, WAE take by anglers was estimated at 10,409 walleyes weighing 29,891 pounds (12,958 pounds of harvest and 16,933 pounds of post-release mortality).
Through November 4, tribal harvest of walleyes is 25,763 walleyes weighing 57,099 pounds. Tribal harvest of northern pike is 9,123 pounds and of yellow perch is 1,264 pounds. There is still a small amount of tribal fishing continuing this fall.

4. Fall Assessment: Preliminary Results for Walleye

* An update was sent via email to participants prior to the meeting
The Fall gillnet assessment was conducted from 9/22/2024 – 10/02/2024. The start date was delayed due to water temperatures above 66 F. Temperatures remained above the 66 F threshold for most of the survey.
Walleye catch rate in both the inshore (16.3 walleye/net) and offshore (20.0 walleye/net) gill nets increased from 2023. Both gillnet survey CPEs were above the time series median. There was some discussion of possible effects of water temperatures on CPEs.
Catch rates of age-0 walleyes were the highest observed in the time series for both electrofishing and forage gillnets.
Age-0 yellow perch CPE second highest observed and age-0 tullibee CPE was the highest observed in the forage gillnets.
In the GLIFWC survey, age-0 walleye CPE was high at over 60 per mile, they were caught in places that normally do not have many, and they were large. The peak of the length frequency distribution as 5.5-6.0 inches and the largest age-0 was about 8.5 inches. Large numbers of age-0 tullibee and other minnows/shiners were observed in some stations.

5. Initial Discussions on Status of the Walleye Population

i. **Spawning Stock:** Mature walleye biomass in the 52-net gillnet survey was 21.1 pounds per net, increasing from 14.5 pounds per net in 2023.
ii. **Walleye Condition:** Relative condition of walleye increased for all sizes. Mid-sized and large fish above 2002-13 standard, but small fish remain below the standard.
iii. **Incoming Recruitment:** Age-0 walleye CPE in electrofishing was high and there was a large range in size of age-0 fish. There was also high CPE of age-0 walleyes in the gillnet surveys.
The length frequency distribution of walleyes in the GN surveys are represented by good year classes in 2013, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2024.
High catches of age-0 walleyes that are large in size, along with abundant forage suggest a strong 2024 year class could recruit to the adult population in a few years, but it is recognized that a year class is fully established when it survives to age-2.

6. Modeling Subcommittee (MSC) Updates

a. **Ramped Decision Tree:** Tom presented work conducted by the modeling subcommittee related to examining the use of a ramped decision tree (as an alternative to the current decision tree that classifies the walleye population into distinct categories).

- There was general agreement that using a continuous metric (ramp) appears to be an improvement over the stepped changes between categories in the current decision tree, however there were questions about the specific calculations and a concern about how to present it to decision makers, so it is clear and understandable.
- The details related to calculations will be sent out to the1837 FC after the meeting with a request for review and comment.
- The MSC will continue to work on the best approach to presenting it for review by decision makes.

b. **Juvenile Index Analysis:**

- Adam provided an update on the alternative calculations for the juvenile walleye index.
- The three proposed metrics related to age-0 walleyes were body condition, length, and age-0 yellow perch abundance.
- A final write-up is in preparation and should include a recommendation on which juvenile index to use going forward.

c. **Productivity Analysis:**

- The MSC is conducting a thorough analysis of walleye productivity at Mille Lacs. Changes in productivity may be important in determining how we might want to manage in the future.
- It includes analysis of stock-recruitment, surplus production, and secondary production.
- Initial calculations were made for different time periods (eras) based on major changes at Mille Lacs (e.g., increased water clarity, invasive species introductions).
- Although initial results suggest that walleye production appears to have declined, there is more work to be completed.
    - Sensitivity of the results to the years included in the different time periods.
    - Correlations of estimates of production to zebra mussels and zooplankton.
    - Goal to complete a thorough analysis to be written up as a manuscript.

d. **Poor Recruitment Paradigm:**

- The poor recruitment paradigm was developed for marine systems and Dr. Lynn Waterhouse (UM Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit) has applied to cisco in Lake Superior. It may be useful

for walleye recruitment at Mille Lacs and there will be a workshop in Mid-November to train fisheries professionals in using the method.

e. **Conceptual Model:** Kevin McDonnell is continuing work on a conceptual model for the Mille Lacs walleye fishery that the MSC began at a meeting this past summer.

7. MN DNR proposal for a framework to set a multiple-year safe harvest levels:

The State has outlined challenges managing/regulating the angling fishery under the current framework (uncertainty about angler effort, catch rates, and water temperatures). Mille Lacs anglers vary in their angling interests. Recently, conservative regulations with the goal of avoiding unplanned closures later in the season have resulted in lost harvest opportunities for anglers. After meeting with tribal representatives, the State subsequently developed a proposal to help overcome those challenges.

The proposal includes determining safe harvest levels that cover multiple years (proposed 3-year), allowing for some amount of flexibility for the state angler fishery.

- Goal in each year is to take less than 1/3 of the total, with a hard cap at 120% annually (of the 1/3 total).
- The 3-year total cannot be exceeded.

Discussion followed that included specific questions about the proposed plan (e.g., what would be fixed in the plan? If things change mid-plan, will it be revised?). In addition, there was concern about how to present to leadership without more details (including more analysis of possible implications).

The Bands would like an opportunity to more thoroughly review and provide feedback on the proposal and are provided 30 days per stipulated protocols.

NOTE: The items below were discussed during an MS Teams meeting conducted December 4 (9:00 am) because we ran out of time.

8. MN DNR proposal to change Mille Lacs muskie stocking

The State is planning to change muskellunge stocking at Mille Lacs in an effort to improve muskellunge angling. Initial research demonstrates that stocking larger fish results in better post-stocking survival. The plan is to change from stocking 3000 fall fingerlings every other year to 800 summer/fall yearlings (or 4000 fall fingerlings if yearlings unavailable) annually.

The Bands requested more information related to muskellunge management history at Mille Lacs (are they native to the lake, how much natural reproduction occurs). The State will pull together information related to muskellunge management at Mille Lacs and send to the Bands.

9. MN DNR Expansion of fall night walleye fishing

The State would like to restore night fishing at night during the fall. Night fishing has been closed at night for several years to limit catch, but there are anglers who would like to restore the opportunity. It is a relatively limited fishery (evidence from creel activity accounts at the end of the current creel survey shifts).

DNR presented one approach to account for additional walleye take by anglers at night (creel survey does not include overnight). Creel data from 1999-2003 (when an overnight creel was conducted) were used to calculate the ratio of day to night effort and catch to apply to recent years and project overnight harvest. Applying to 2021-2023, mean estimated walleye take overnight would average around 1,000 pounds.

The MSC was assigned to evaluate other potential approaches to estimating overnight walleye take.