

**MEETING MINUTES**  
**Minnesota 1837 Ceded Territory Fisheries Committee**  
**January 14-15, 2025 at Fond du Lac Resource Management**

**TUESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2025, 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM**  
**WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15, 2025, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM**

1. Introductions

- Attendee introductions were made, and a sign-in sheet was circulated.
- Fond du Lac tribal chair, Bruce Savage, provided a welcome message to the committee.

2. Review and approve agenda (Action)

- The committee reviewed the agenda and agreed to move item 4 and 7 to the end of the first day in preparation for the following morning.

3. Past meeting minutes (Information)

- August 2024 and November 2024 minutes were approved in advance of the meeting.

4. Review of 2024 Fisheries Surveys (Information)

a. State Angler Creel

- The state angler harvest summary table is presented on page 15 of the DNR book.
- Total angler walleye harvest plus hooking mortality for the 2024 fishing season is estimated at 31,898 pounds; yellow perch harvest is estimated at 4,364 pounds; northern pike harvest plus hooking mortality is estimated at 6,066 pounds.
- Winter catch rates for walleye in 2023-2024 were the highest observed. However, they are likely not comparable to previous years due to the poor ice conditions resulting in a lack of permanent and wheelhouse overnight fishing effort.
- It was noted that interviews obtained from tribal anglers (tribal anglers generally self-identify to creel clerks; clerks do not ask if an angler is a tribal member) are removed from creel survey calculations for estimating angling take with respect to the state's share of the safe harvest level.
  - However, total walleye take estimates used as inputs into stock assessment models include all measured take.
  - To account for tribal angling harvest, 1,700 pounds from the tribal share of the safe harvest level is set aside.
  - With the low amount of tribal angling effort at this point, there is no need to conduct target sampling of tribal angler harvest.

b. Tribal Fishing

- A handout summarizing tribal harvest was circulated.
- Tribal harvest of walleye from the 2024 fishing year is 57,058 pounds; northern pike harvest is 9,124 pounds; yellow perch harvest is 1,298 pounds.
- There was discussion about tribal harvest reporting by landing and it was suggested that graphing tribal harvest/catch rates by landing over time may be useful to look for trends. Several complications with that suggestion were acknowledged.
- There was tribal harvest from Goose Lake (50.7 pounds of walleye) and Green Lake (255.9 pounds of walleye and 97 pounds of northern pike), both in Chisago County.

c. Annual Fall surveys DNR and GLIFWC

- Results from the annual DNR fall surveys are presented in the DNR book starting on page 19.
- Gillnet catches of walleye increased in both the inshore (16.3 walleyes/net; 25.2 pounds/net) and offshore (20.0 walleyes/net; 26.7 pounds/net) surveys. Catch rates from both surveys were above the 2002-13 median CPE.
- The length frequency distribution shows high catches of age-0 walleyes and low catches of age-1

walleyes.

- The number and biomass of mature male and female walleyes caught in both gillnet surveys increased in 2024 from 2023. Mature male biomass in the gillnets was above the 2002-13 median, where the mature female biomass was below median.
  - Walleye body condition improved for all three size categories from 2023 to 2024. Walleyes from 14-20 inches and longer than 20 inches were above the Mille Lacs standard. Walleyes less than 14 inches were just below the standard.
  - Age-0 cisco (TLC) catch rates in the small-mesh forage gillnets were the highest observed and age-0 yellow perch the second highest observed in the time series (2010-2024).
  - Catch rate of yellow perch longer than 9 inches has increased annually since 2019.
    - There was some discussion about how angler catch and harvest may respond to the increased gillnet CPE.
    - It was suggested that yellow perch growth be compared with nearby lakes.
  - There was a question regarding the disposition of fish from the DNR fall surveys. It was explained that there was a list of approved organizations to receive fish from our surveys. A request was made to investigate how the tribes may be added to that list to receive survey fish for distribution to elders.
  - Invasive species
    - Zebra mussel density remains at approximately one-third of the peak.
    - Zooplankton abundance and biomass remains relatively low.
    - Spiny water flea samples are still backlogged and have not been processed since 2021.
  - Handouts summarizing the fall juvenile walleye survey conducted by GLIFWC and the tribes were circulated.
    - Age-0 walleye catch rates were high and the fish were large for their age. Age-1 walleye catches were low. It was noted that crews caught YOY in places they normally do not. Some historically good sites were unable to be sampled due to windy conditions.
- d. Walleye population status – decision tree
- The walleye population status for 2025 is Category 5. Mature biomass >20 pounds/net and juvenile walleye index >1.
    - Mature biomass in the 52-net gillnet compliment is 21.1 pounds/net and juvenile index is 1.38.
  - The modeling subcommittee presented the proposed decision tree revision (ramped decision tree).
    - There was general agreement with implementing the revised decision tree to classify walleye population status and comparing it to the current decision tree as an approach to evaluating its performance.

## 5. Modeling reports (Discussion)

- a. Walleye – results of the three walleye stock assessment models were presented.
- All three stock assessment models showed an increase in 2025 mature walleye biomass from 2024 estimates.
    - Increases ranged from 19%-28%.
    - The improved mature biomass was due to improved body condition and higher maturation rates at younger age.
  - All three models estimated the highest biomass of walleyes age 3 and older since 2010, increasing by 11%-27% from 2024 depending on the model.
  - All three models also estimated increases in the abundance of walleyes 14 inches and longer.
  - Trends in modeled abundance generally track the mark-recapture population estimates (PEs). The PEs are included in model fitting.
- b. Northern Pike
- A handout with the results of the northern pike (NOP) surplus production model was circulated.
    - The model estimated NOP biomass at approximately 270,000 pounds, the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the time series. The ratio of biomass in 2025 to the biomass at maximum sustained yield (MSY)

is high (1.74).

- The maximum sustainable yield is estimated at 29,650 pounds. The estimated ratio of 2024 fishing mortality to the fishing mortality at MSY is low (0.29).
- The NOP population could sustain higher harvest rates.
- Projected yield at  $F_{MSY}$  is approximately 48,000 pounds.

#### 6. Set Harvest level for Mille Lacs Lake (Discussion/Action)

##### a. Northern Pike

- The 1837 FC agreed to continue with a 100,000-pound harvest cap with target of 35,000-50,000 pounds. The harvest level is split evenly between the State and Tribes (50,000 pounds). The committee recognizes that 100,000 pounds of annual northern pike harvest is not sustainable in the long-term.

##### b. Yellow Perch

- The 1837 FC agreed to again set the yellow perch harvest level at 73,000 pounds split equally (36,500 pounds) between the State and the Tribes (first agreed upon in January 2023), based on the partitioning of yellow perch yield from total fisheries yield estimated from the Morphoedaphic Index (MEI) recommended by the Strategic Planning for Ontario Fisheries (SPOF) working group number 12 (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources 1982). The same 20,000-pound action level was also agreed to; if angler harvest reaches 20,000 pounds, the committee would meet to discuss.

##### c. Tullibee and Burbot

- Angling harvest regulations for both cisco (TLC) and burbot are restrictive. Tribal harvest on both is also low. It was agreed that no quotas would continue to be set for TLC and burbot. A 15,000-pound action level was set for TLC.

#### 7. 2025 Inland Waters (Information/Discussion)

- a. Walleye harvestable surplus and threshold values for other lakes in the 1837 Ceded Territory were shared in advance of the meeting. They are found in the state's book on page 104.

#### 8. 2025 Management and research activities (Discussion)

##### a. Large Lake Assessment work (Minnesota DNR)

- Annual Spring NOP trap netting will be conducted to assess size structure.
- Annual water quality and zooplankton sampling will be conducted.
- Annual smallmouth bass electrofishing will be conducted to assess size structure.
- Zebra mussel sampling will be conducted in August.
- The next walleye mark-recapture population estimate will be in 2028.

##### b. GLIFWC Sampling

- Spring shoreline electrofishing for juvenile walleyes will be conducted.
- Acoustic receivers will be retrieved and downloaded in June.
  - The acoustic array will be updated so it can triangulate fish locations to help identify spawning sites.
  - Hoping to tag additional cisco
- Fall shoreline electrofishing for juvenile walleye will be conducted.
- Greg Berg will connect the Mille Lacs watershed group with GLIFWC work.
- Mille Lacs Band is revamping some of their hatchery facility to fit a research project that will be conducted in 2025 with the help of a University of Illinois graduate student.

##### c. Modeling subcommittee reports and assignments

- The subcommittee is working to try to wrap up projects in progress. These include:
  - Evaluating the juvenile walleye index to assess recruitment to the walleye fishery
  - Evaluating walleye productivity
  - Final report on the ramped decision tree
  - Finalization of the conceptual model for the Mille Lacs walleye management system.

- Sustainable yield analyses.
- d. Research subcommittee
- e. Others

## 9. Multi-year harvest plan (Discussion/Action)

- Brad began by reiterating the difficulty the State has managing its share of the walleye harvest level with any kind of precision when needing to be certain it is not exceeded while trying to incorporate angler desires. Most fishing effort occurs in May and June, so the State has to start the year very conservatively to ensure its share is not exceeded. Recently the State has harvested a small percentage of its share. Most recently, in 2024, predictive model settings (for conditions that are not in the State's control) used to project the State fishery suggested the State may exceed its share unless very restrictive regulations were used. However, most of those initial predictive model settings did not match the conditions that were eventually observed on the lake in 2024 (weather, forage, bite). Because of the nature of the fishery, by the time the State can relax regulations in years where this happens, the best angler harvest opportunities have passed.
- Overage plans have been used in the past to alleviate some of these challenges. The State noted that it would like to reestablish some flexibility that allows anglers the opportunity to harvest walleye early in the season.
- The State proposed a three-year plan with a quota that applies to the three-year period, but recognizing that the State would not want to take large portion of that quota in a single year.
- The walleye population is in a good place, with multiple decent year classes and good forage. Thus it may be a good time to try something a little different to support additional flexibility.
- There was discussion among the committee:
  - It was suggested that the fishing year could be redefined to start July 1, so the amount of state share left would be known during May and June. This suggestion was tabled, and the committee agreed that it might want to review this possibility at a later date.
- The Tribes presented a counterproposal:
  - It was suggested that the plan be for 2 years instead of 3 (2025-2026).
  - Any overage in 2025 would need to be repaid in 2026 (by reduction in the state share).
  - A maximum overage of 15% would be allowed in 2025 (conservation cap).
  - Catch and release may need to be implemented when the state share is reached.
  - The State's walleye fishery would be closed prior to the conservation cap being reached.
  - Any amount below the State share (underage) in 2025 may not be used to offset an overage in 2026.
  - The walleye safe harvest level will be determined annually.
  - The exploitation rate in 2026 cannot be higher than in 2025 if there is an overage.
  - If an agreement is reached, the State and Tribes will work on combined press release.
  - The plan will be reviewed but may be renewed upon mutual agreement.
- The State responded that it needed time to consider this proposal.
  - One of the primary goals for the State was to allow flexibility in determining regulations so that harvest opportunity could be allowed early in the season.
  - A few initial concerns from the State included: 1) the inability to use underages (or get some kind of credit for lost harvest opportunity); 2) small overages and large overages are treated equally in the counterproposal; 3) requirement to change to catch and release may not be worth the effort under certain circumstances (e.g., late in the season when release mortality is low and effort is low) so an alternative may be that "as the quota is reached, regulations changes will be considered".

- The State will continue to make in-season walleye harvest and release mortality projections.
- The State agreed to discuss the counterproposal internally, and return with feedback in the near future.

#### 10. Set Harvest level for Mille Lacs Lake (Discussion/Action)

##### a. Walleye

- The 2024 walleye safe harvest level (SHL) was set at 157,500, a 10% reduction in harvest level from the 2023 SHL based on the modeled reduction in mature biomass of 10% (according to the DNR SCAA model).
- The 2025 mature biomass is estimated at 28% higher. Increasing the 157,500 pound SHL by 28% results in a SHL of 201,600 pounds. This is approximately 13% of the mature biomass; the same target exploitation rate as last year.
- The Tribes agreed to set the 2025 SHL at 201,600 pounds pending agreement on an overage plan. The tribal share is 88,000 pounds and the state share is 113,600 pounds.
- Finalization of the SHL will come after discussions with leadership.

#### 11. Next meeting

##### a. Set date and location for summer meeting (Action)

- The summer meeting date was set for Wednesday, July 23. MN DNR will host.