Agenda
Minnesota 1837 Ceded Territory Fisheries Committee
10:00 a.m. July 23, 2025
Lower Level Conference Room, Brainerd Area Fisheries Office, 1601 Minnesota Drive

Attendees: See list

Online Attendees: John Hoenig

*Note: Highlights show action items or requests

1. **Agenda Approval and Introductions**

Introductions were made and an attendance list was circulated. The agenda was reviewed, specifically noting changes and additions since the first draft was circulated. Discussion of the ongoing fish kill at Mille Lacs was added to the agenda.

2. **2025 Spring Band Harvest Summary (GLIFWC)**

A tribal harvest (to date) summary was circulated and discussed. It was noted that tribal harvest got off to a slow start but then picked up in a short period of time. Walleye (Ogaa) harvest is at 29,696 fish weighing 69,366.7 pounds. Northern pike (Ginoozhe) harvest to date is 860 fish weighing 4,416.6 pounds. Yellow perch (Asaawe) harvest to date is at 3,468 fish weighing 2,409.9 pounds. Harvest (in pounds) of walleye was nearly equally split between spearing and gillnetting, but the average weight of speared fish was heavier. There was some discussion regarding the proportion of walleye harvest by gear. The amount of effort by each gear may depend on the band, with some conducting more spearing than others. The regulations have varied across years and many tribes were spearing only when there was concerted effort to protect the 2013 year class, rather than using both spearing and gill nets as they normally would. Tribal catch per effort by gear type will be calculated once the harvest season has concluded.

3. **2025 Mille Lacs Angler Harvest Update (MNDNR)**

A table summarizing estimated angler harvest through July 15 was circulated and discussed. Walleye harvest by angling (including winter) is at 8,457 fish weighing 23,061 pounds. A total of 169,321 walleyes weighing 38,780 pounds have been released by anglers. Anglers are reporting catching a large number of walleyes that are likely from the 2024 year class. An additional 1,384 walleyes weighing 1,445 pounds have been estimated to die from post-release mortality, so that total walleye take by angling is at 9,841 fish weighing a total of 24,506 pounds. Open water state angling effort has declined after a decent start to the season and currently sits at 257,311 hours. The decline in angling effort is likely due to the tough bite. It is not anticipated that the bite will improve much (if at all) the remainder of the open water season. There still appears to be good forage. Northern pike harvest by anglers is at 184 fish weighing 733 pounds with an estimated additional post release mortality of 149 fish weighing 611 pounds for a total kill of 333 northern pike weighing 1,344 pounds. Yellow perch harvest is estimated at 59,488 fish weighing 48,073 pounds (3,626 fish weighing 2,509 pounds during open water). The open water yellow perch harvest appears to be mostly incidental take by walleye anglers. Only 79 pounds of smallmouth bass (Noosa'owesi) are estimated to have been harvested by anglers with an additional 224,758 pounds released. Guides appear to be doing well finding smallmouth bass but general anglers appear to be having more difficulty. No muskellunge (Maashkinoozhe) have been reported harvested and 158 have been reported caught and released.

There was concern raised about state anglers exceeding their share of the yellow perch quota without a closure to the fishery, which would be required and executed if walleye quotas are exceeded. It was noted that the amount and quality of yellow perch data is not as good as the walleye data, making setting harvest quotas more challenging. It was also acknowledged that the yellow perch quota was set based on the best available science and knowledge at the time and was agreed upon by the state and the tribes. The state acknowledged that it was not the intent to exceed its share and responded to the high harvest by reducing the bag limit from 20 to 5 in March. No additional action has been taken for the open water season due to the low (and mainly incidental) harvest of yellow perch. Additional concern was raised about the relatively high perch harvest and possible effects on yellow perch as forage. There was a question raised about the status of winter yellow perch tournament reports that are not yet included in angling harvest summary. Reports have been submitted to DNR. Another question was asked about why the late ice creel period effort estimate was so much lower than the previous creel period. This is likely due to multiple factors, including the ice shelter removal requirements and that many resorts end their ice fishing operations (e.g., maintaining ice roads and ice access). There was some discussion about the apparent contradictory social media reports and creel survey results.

There was a discussion about forage fish assessments on Mille Lacs. MN DNR stated that summer forage gillnet surveys have begun and have captured age-1 yellow perch and cisco but age-0 fish are too small to be vulnerable at current.

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

At the time of the meeting an increase in the walleye daily bag limit from 2 to 3 was still being considered by the state, focusing on questions whether it was worth going through the process of making a change given the slow bite. Angling harvest of walleye is being limited by the slow fishing, not the bag limit. There was discussion about how the bite will be for the remainder of the open water season, particularly related to if it may improve in the fall. The abundance of age-1 yellow perch is contributing to the tough bite for walleye that can eat them. As age-0 yellow perch begin to appear, it may continue to make the bite tough. It has been noted that when people do catch fish, they appear to be in good condition.

There was a discussion about the state's thoughts on changing the harvest slot length limits. MN DNR responded with interest in discussing lower slot sizes that are smaller, but recognized the current harvest management approach that protects small fish. MNDNR expressed interest in having a conversation reviewing that harvest management approach, particularly as it relates to what at current appears to be a good 2024 year class of walleyes, and concerns about the slow growth of the abundant 2013 year class. The 2013 year class was intentionally protected from targeted harvest by removing the maximum size requirements for spearfishing and setting harvest slot limits that avoided the lengths that included the 2013 year class. There is a desire to discuss this more in October. Regarding consideration of allowing more than 1 fish over 20 inches, the state does not currently have that option because 1 walleye over 20 inches is in statute, so would require a legislative change. It was suggested that part of the October discussion would include consideration of the effects of allowing harvest of small walleyes on the size of the mature fish because of the potential effects of fish size on egg quality and age class diversity.

5. **2025 Spring Electrofishing Survey for Juvenile Walleye in Mille Lacs Lake (GLIFWC)**

A summary of the 2025 spring EF survey for juvenile walleye was circulated and discussed. A map showing the locations of sampled stations was presented. Due to weather conditions and equipment issues, not all stations were sampled, but the survey was the most productive to date. Confirmation of the catch rates will be presented in October when walleye age estimation is completed. The size distribution of juvenile walleyes assumed to be age-1 included a wide range of lengths.

6. **Data Exchange and Review**
    a. **Mille Lacs Lake – creel report and large lake report (MNDNR)**
    b. **Other Lakes – creel report and summer assessments (MNDNR)**

Completed survey reports from Mille Lacs and other lakes in the 1837 Ceded Territory were exchanged by email prior to the meeting. Need to verify creel surveys from 2024 on 1837 lakes other than Mille Lacs.

7. **Muskellunge stocking update (MNDNR)**
    a. **MNDNR plans to stock 800 yearling muskellunge (or 4000 fall fingerlings if yearlings unavailable) annually beginning this fall.**

MNDNR plans to change the muskellunge stocking regime at Mille Lacs has been discussed at previous 1837 FC meetings. During the development of the new muskellunge long range plan, MN DNR heard from anglers that there is a desire to improve muskellunge fishing at Mille Lacs. MN DNR will increase the stocking frequency and the size of fish stocked in an effort to achieve that goal. Although there is some natural reproduction, the fishery is largely supported by stocking. Survival of stocked muskellunge improves with increased size at stocking. MN DNR expects any improvements in the adult fishery to take several years. There was discussion about how this proposal aligns with tribal goals to ensure effects on walleye are minimal. MNDNR will share research results from projects that look at muskellunge diets and niche overlap in relationship to other predator fish species at a future meeting.

8. **Yellow Perch subcommittee updates**

A memo summarizing the yellow perch subcommittee updates was circulated and discussed. The statistical catch at age model (SCAA) for yellow perch was updated with data through the 2024 fall survey. Although the model converged to provide results, it will take more effort to determine their reliability. It does appear that the abundance of yellow perch age-3 and older have been increasing and may be at levels similar to 2010. The subcommittee has also been evaluating other population reference points that may be helpful in decision making but that align better with the data quality and quantity (i.e., yellow perch data are not as detailed as the walleye data). Estimates of total mortality from catch curve analyses are being evaluated for comparison with model estimates. The subcommittee is also in the early stages of evaluating some tools recently presented as part of a quantitative fisheries center training that can provide estimated of mortality. Ultimately, the subcommittee hopes to provide an informative and easily understandable tool to aid in setting harvest quotas.

There is an ongoing fish kill at Mille Lacs that has resulted in yellow perch mortality. Fish have been sent to the MN DNR fish health lab for evaluation with no results to date. The wide range of the fish kill suggest that it is likely not due to copper sulfate treatments for swimmer's itch or vegetation control. The committee would like an update on the cause of the fish kill when results from the lab are available.

9. **Modelling subcommittee updates**
    a. **Ramped decision tree**
    b. **Juvenile index**
    c. **Productivity Analysis**
    d. **Walleye harvest policy**

A table of historical exploitation rates was circulated and discussed. The table should provide valuable context for harvest policy development. An estimate of the new ramped decision tree metric and how it compares to the original decision tree status metric is included in the table. The ramped decision tree status will continue to be calculated in conjunction with the original decision tree for several years. An update on the juvenile index was provided that suggested removing age-0 walleye data from its calculation because its addition does not

significantly differ from calculation without it. A final report will be forthcoming. The productivity analysis is being reviewed with the assistance of Lynn Waterhouse and Jeremiah Shrovnal (University of MN Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit).

10. Updates on Management and Research Activities

a. **UMN Coop Unit update (Levi Suchla and Lynn Waterhouse)**

Levi Suchla presented an update on his M.S. graduate work at the UMN Coop Unit evaluating factors affecting walleye body condition at Mille Lacs. Using boosted regression trees (or gradient boosting models) for the analysis, he explored the effect of biotic and abiotic factors on body condition of adult and subadult walleyes, and length of age-0 walleyes. Preliminary results suggest that variables related to productivity and invasive species may be influential. For age-0 walleyes, the abundance of age-2 cisco seem to be most influential. Levi is working on completing analysis and summary of the work.

Lynn Waterhouse presented an update to her analysis of walleye recruitment using the poor-recruitment paradigm. Using the 1st quartile (4.90) of age-1 electrofishing catch rate as "poor recruitment", there are 9 low values and 24 not-low (33 years of data). The model could not predict when CPUE would be poor (in the 1st quartile), but it could predict when it was outside the 1st quartile. More work needs to be done to explore additional covariates and a simulation study to validate model's false positive rate given observed covariates.

There were 5 thresholds that if exceeded resulted in CPUE higher than 4.9 (the top 3 quartiles). These covariates and thresholds were:

- July GDD5 < 852.5 (n=12)
- Aug GDD5 < 743 (n=8)
- May wind speed < 5.89 (n=10)
- Feb mean temp prior year (Age 0) > 15.45 (n=11)
- Year avg wind speed prior year (Age 0) > 6.684 (n=12)

b. Ogaa Spawning Site Fidelity (Kayla Lenz)

Kayla Lenz presented an update on a project using acoustic telemetry to identify Ogaa spawning sites and site fidelity at Mille Lacs. Results suggest there are six "hotspots" around Mille Lacs with the largest number of detections around spawning time. In addition, most of Ogaa displayed spawning site fidelity and some Ogaa will skip a year of spawning.

c. Telemetry data request (MN DNR)

MN DNR submitted a written request for walleye telemetry data from Mille Lacs Band to help investigate potential effects of movement and location during and after the fall gillnet survey on survey catches. Discussion resulted in the recommendation that MN DNR revise the request to movement summaries rather than raw data. Mille Lacs Band will review and respond to the request.

11. Summer and Fall 2025 Survey Plans

a. MNDNR Assessments in Mille Lacs and Other Lakes

MN DNR have started the summer forage gillnets, which will go until the fall survey. Fall electrofishing for juvenile walleye is also planned for this year. There is additional monthly water quality and zooplankton sampling to conduct. The open water creel survey extends through October. Zebra mussel sampling occurs in August. MN DNR will conduct the usual fall surveys beginning in September that include electrofishing and gillnetting. There are also coring samples that's being taken as part of a project led by the University of MN and Science Museum.

b. GLIFWC Assessments in Mille Lacs and Other Lakes

GLIFWC will coordinate fall electrofishing and will communicate those sampling plans. The acoustic receivers are being pulled and downloaded this fall. A reconfiguration of some receivers to help with finer scale movement will be done around Rainbow Island. Fond du Lac will reach out to the Hinckley Area to inquire if they need help and to exchange data related to harvest on 1837 lakes in that area.

12. Next Meeting

The fall meeting was set for October 29, 2025. Mille Lacs Band agreed to host and details will follow. The committee also agreed to tentatively plan on Fond du Lac hosting the January meeting, MN DNR hosting the summer meeting, and Mille Lacs Band the fall meeting.