



LVFIG meeting notes: June 22, 2016

Agenda:

- Check-in and housekeeping topics
- Cormorant management update
- Walleye population goals and measures
- Regulation change discussion preview

Housekeeping items:

- Welcome new member Gabrielle Holman, Ecological Resources Manager with the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa
- Reminder that mileage reimbursements are due before end of June
- Reminder to submit volunteer forms (background check and Volunteer Agreement forms) if you are interested in volunteering with Fisheries this year. Forms must be completed annually.
- Reminder to please include your name in emails to the Input Group.

Cormorant management update:

- 2014 suit filed against US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- May 26, 2016, U.S. District Court vacates cormorant Public Resource Depredation Order (PRDO)
- Requires MN to cease and desist cormorant control activities; egg oiling suspended
- Moving forward, DNR will collect additional data on cormorants; USFWS will update environmental assessment (EA); DNR will develop Lake Vermilion Environmental Assessment if necessary, and explore site-specific permits for cormorant control outside of the PRDO
- See handout for additional details

Walleye population goals and measures

See handouts for additional details

Overall walleye goal: Support a robust walleye fishery with sufficient spawning stock to meet reproductive needs and provide the opportunity for anglers to harvest walleye and catch quality-sized fish. Lake Vermilion's walleye fishery will be evaluated as a whole while considering both east and west end dynamics.

Discussion on overall walleye goal:

- Define "quality"; it means different things to different people:
 - Some indicate 13-18" preferred for eating;
 - Some indicate >23" considered trophy;

- One suggestion to consider changing the word “quality” to “trophy”
 - recognize that different users fish for different purposes – some for eating, some for a trophy experience (taking a photo, catching a memorable fish)
 - consider whether current size preferences might change if regulation changes
- General agreement with overall walleye goal; clarify that goal is to “provide the opportunity for anglers to both harvest and catch quality-sized fish” to acknowledge different user interests

Abundance objective: Maintain an abundant and healthy walleye fishery of diverse sizes and age classes; specifically, maintain walleye gill net catch rate (3-year moving average) above 14 fish/net (25th percentile from 1996-2015).

Discussion on abundance objective:

- prefer a higher goal; suggestions include 75th percentile, or 40-60th percentile range
- 40th percentile would be approx. 15-16 fish/net, similar to 25th percentile; however, setting the goal at a higher percentile may lead to more restrictive regulations; Input Group should fully consider possible tradeoffs before setting this objective
- note that the addition of new gill net locations would not affect this data. (DNR can use data from the new gill nets immediately, but would not initially include the new net locations in our annual Catch per Unit of Effort (CPUE) estimates until we could determine that they are statistically consistent with our current net sets - likely at least 5 years. If the new net sets were extremely high or low in fish caught, they could bias or change our CPUE estimates simply because we added nets, not because there was an actual increase or decline in fish abundance.)

Size structure objective: Walleye size distribution which provides harvest- size fish in relation to regulation; e.g., maintain the percentage (3-year moving average) of walleye sampled in gill nets <18 inches above 82% (25th percentile from 1996-2015).

Discussion on size structure objective:

- Approx. 50% of females become mature at 16.8” on the East end, and at 18.2” on the West end. Female fish mature at smaller sizes when populations are stressed.
- Need to preserve a certain amount of large females, or spawning stock biomass (SSB), in the population.
- DNR has limited ability to control size structure
- Need ability to bring down average sizes on West end; would like a trigger to do something when the number of harvestable fish on the West end dips too low
- General agreement to include a size structure objective, and include different objectives for East vs. West ends; no conclusion regarding the specific options presented by DNR – more discussion needed.

Reproductive potential objective: Maintain sufficient spawning stock (mature female Walleye biomass) to meet abundance and recruitment targets. Specifically, maintain spawning stock biomass (3-year moving average) between 1.3-2.0 pounds per acre (25th-75th percentiles from 1996-2015).

Reproductive potential objective discussion:

- DNR uses a permanent rule-making process for setting regulations; this process typically takes about 1 year and includes broad public comment opportunity. Regulation changes would be initiated based on at least 2-3 years of data.
- Response to concerns on West end have taken more than 3 years; issues on West end are driving anglers to fish on the East end
- Need to look at East and West differences
- Suggestion to have hatchery as a fall-back if SSB drops
- General agreement with this objective and use of 25th-75th percentiles.

Recruitment objective: Maintain sufficient numbers of juvenile Walleye surviving to catchable sizes; specifically, maintain Walleye year class strength index greater than 1.4 (25th percentile); East: >1.9; West: >0.8. Consider also including electrofishing catch rate objective: maintain young-of-the-year walleye fall electrofishing catch rates (3-year moving average) above 84 fish per hour (25th percentile from 1996-2015). East: 101 YOY walleye/hr; West: 50 YOY walleye/hr.

Recruitment objective discussion:

- Electrofishing data for age-0 walleye is worthless; don't include an electrofishing catch rate objective. Encourage DNR to collect age-1 data.
- Because this data doesn't reflect the far West end specifically, it can't trigger any actions to address concerns in that area
- Most Input Group members generally comfortable using year class strength index greater than 1.4 (25th percentile); 25th percentile seems too low to some. General agreement to use separate objectives for East and West.

Harvest objective: Maintain annual total Walleye harvest at a sustainable level near 78,000 lbs. Specifically, maintain May through September boat angler harvest less than 65,000 lbs (East: 45,000-53,000 lbs; West: 9,000-15,000 lbs), and remainder of harvest (October-May fishing, shore and night fishing, and tribal harvest) less than 13,000 lbs. State harvest levels can be revisited if tribal harvest increases substantially in the future.

Angler catch rates objective: Provide satisfactory angler catch and harvest opportunities; specifically, maintain May through September targeting catch rates (2-year average) above 0.37 fish/ hour (25th percentile). East: 0.47 walleye/hr; West: 0.18 walleye/hr.

Angler catch rate objective discussion:

- 1 walleye every 5 hours (0.18 walleye/hr) is too low a catch rate
- 0.18 walleye/hr is consistent with historical catch rates
- Need to balance between catch rates and harvest rates
- A regulation change is expected to result in increased harvest rates, but we don't know whether it will influence overall catch rates
- Discussed that 25th percentile thresholds are a minimum that we don't want to fall below (which calls for management action), as opposed to an ideal number that we are shooting for.

Regulation change discussion preview

- See handout for background
- Consider a minimum slot size
- Consider East and west regulations

Action items:

- Input Group members are strongly encouraged to review the proposed goals and actions with members of their communities and organizations, and bring community input to the July meeting.
- The August meeting will focus on habitat issues, including aquatic invasive species (AIS), tournaments, and other special topics. The discussion of walleye regulation changes will be revisited in the fall.
- One to two additional meetings will be scheduled in August and/or later to ensure sufficient coverage of key topics. This may extend the overall timeline of the planning process into October or early November.