

## Northern zone musky season opens May 27

MADISON – Good news for anglers eager for the May 27 opening day of the musky fishing season on northern lakes: if state netting surveys are any indication, there's more fish that are 45 inches and larger than a generation ago.

The northern zone includes inland waters north of U.S. Highway 10. For most waters, there is a minimum length limit of 34 inches and a daily bag of one. The southern zone season opened May 6 with the same length and bag limits.

This spring's netting surveys in Wisconsin, as in recent years, are revealing greater numbers of these trophy size fish than in the late 1970s and 1980s, according to Tim Simonson, a Department of Natural Resources fish biologist who leads the department's musky committee.

"I was up north netting in early May and some very large fish were being caught in fyke nets this year," he says. "It reflects a trend we've been seeing in recent years in our netting surveys, and it means there's a larger number of big fish out there for anglers to catch."

For instance, 8.6 percent of the 151 adult fish netted on the Chippewa Flowage for a musky genetics study in 2006 exceeded 45 inches, compared to less than 2 percent found during a 1990-91 population estimate on the flowage. Fully 34 percent of the adult fish netted during the 2006 study exceeded 40 inches, compared to 12 percent during the 1990-91 survey. (see related story).

That proportion of big fish is considerably higher than in the late 1970s and 1980s, when 2.5 percent of the adult musky caught statewide in DNR fyke nets exceeded 45 inches, and 3 percent caught in northwestern Wisconsin exceeded 45 inches, DNR data show.

More DNR fisheries crews were out on the water looking for musky this spring than in recent years as part of the department's long-term effort to evaluate and improve its musky stocking program. That effort takes advantage of recent advances in genetic analysis and involves three major pieces:

- changing the way DNR collects adult fish and eggs for stocking, including obtaining them only from waters with naturally reproducing musky populations;
- conducting DNA tests of fish samples to identify whether there are distinct musky strains in the state and their geographic boundaries, along with fish geneticist Brian Sloss, a University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point fisheries professor, and his graduate students, who will be conducting the analysis.
- evaluating how the musky strain used in Wisconsin's stocking program performs compared to Minnesota in terms of their survival, the size the fish reach, and their ability to reproduce.

"We have already changed our egg collection practices to reflect the best genetic principles in musky stocking," Simonson says.

This spring, DNR crews collected eggs and sperm from fish living in waters where the fish populations are naturally reproducing instead of from waters maintained entirely by stocking. In northwestern Wisconsin, eggs were collected from the Chippewa Flowage instead of Bone Lake; in northeastern Wisconsin, they collected eggs from North Twin Lake.

Fish crews followed precise instructions from Sloss on collecting eggs during different times in the spawning season, sampling a cross section of females, and mixing the optimum number of males and females. For example, while eggs in the past had been collected from very few females over a relatively short time period, this year, the goal was for each hatchery to collect eggs from 26 different females, with three males used to fertilize the eggs of each female.

Fisheries crews also collected genetic samples from roughly about 20 naturally reproducing populations this spring for Sloss' laboratory to analyze. The crews took a nickel-sized snip of each musky's fin, from which Sloss will be able to determine the genetic lineage of the fish's parents.

The DNR Spooner hatchery was expecting yet this spring to receive young fish from the Minnesota DNR to be reared at Spooner and stocked into some of the same lakes as Wisconsin DNR fish, for a side-by-side comparison of the fish's survival and growth.

Genetic strain is only one of several factors that determines the growth and size structure of muskellunge populations; the size of the water, the kind and availability of forage is another, as is fishing pressure.

More information on the stocking evaluation and improvement plan developed by the DNR musky team, including presentations made by Sloss, can be found on the [Muskellunge Committee](#) page of the DNR Web site.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Tim Simonson (608) 266-5222