

Muskellunge Standing Team Meeting Notes

Schmeckle Reserve, Stevens Point, Wisconsin March 10, 2009

Attendance: Steve Gilbert, Gary Lindenberger, Terry Margenau, David Rowe, Jordan Weeks, Doug Welch, Kurt Welke, Tim Simonson, Scot Stewart, Joe Dan Rose, Mark Luehring, Joe Weiss, John Aschenbrenner, Greg Wells, and Dan Isermann, Mike Hansen, Brian Sloss, and Todd Caspers, UWSP.

Informational Items: Assembly Bill 4 - Repeal of muskellunge catch and release season – AB4 and companion Senate Bill 48 have both been approved by their respective committees; AB4 has passed the full Assembly and has been messaged to the Senate and referred to committee (which has already approved SB48, an identical bill). SB48 is currently available for a vote by the full Senate. If either bill is passed by the full Senate, it must still be signed by the Governor. You can continue to track the progress of these bills by going to the [Legislature's web page](#), click on "legislation", and then click on "bill search". **UPDATE:** AB4 has passed both houses of the legislature (SB48 was tabled) and is awaiting the Governor's signature (3/31/2009)

2009 Rule Change Proposals – There are 2 department proposals on the questionnaire for the upcoming spring hearings, April 14, 2009: A 50" minimum length limit for Big Sand and Long Lakes, Vilas County; and a 50" minimum length limit for Kentuck Lake, Vilas County. Steve Gilbert encouraged musky anglers to get out and attend the Vilas County hearing. He has heard of some opposition from Kentuck Lake residents. There is also a Conservation Congress Advisory Question seeking to increase the minimum length limit on Green Bay, Lake Michigan and connected waters from 50" to 54". Here is [the questionnaire](#) for 2009.

Status of fish for stocking Green Bay – At this time, we are still waiting for an exemption to the interim rule that prohibits the import of fish. The final rule would have allowed the import (under certain conditions) but implementation has been put off indefinitely by APHIS due to some other, controversial but unrelated concerns. We are expecting a response from APHIS "very soon". Meanwhile, the fish have to be out of Fleming College in April, so time is running out. **UPDATE:** It looks like, after jumping through many hoops, that the fish will be picked in early April and stocked directly into the inland brood lakes.

WDNR Research Update – Martin Jennings was unable to attend but he provided a brief summary via email: 1) Recent work on brood stock operations issues are near an endpoint. 2) Marty will continue working with Brian Sloss and NOR on fine-tuning things like brood lake selection and appropriate approaches to rotations and management unit boundaries as genetic work is more fully analyzed. 3) Leech Lake project has been terminated as directed by FM Board last year. 4) Future direction for the WDNR research program will be focused on empirical work on age and growth issues, with considerable effort on PIT tagging and recapture to measure growth. One consensus area for additional research identified at the meeting was delayed hooking and handling mortality.

Discussion Items: Muskellunge exploitation – Dan Isermann presented a modeling effort that addressed the question: Does the existing level of exploitation impacts trophy management (size-structure and abundance of large 45"+ fish) on Trout Lake? He worked with Steve Gilbert to compile data from Trout Lake, where we have a consistent, recent data collection, a history of producing trophy fish, a 45" size limit, and which has recently had

considerable tribal harvest, perhaps due to the nature of the regression model used to compute safe harvest (i.e., a low density, stocked population in a lake with a large surface area). Cleithrum ages (and back-calculated lengths-at-age from a handful of females (~6)) resulted in an average ultimate length of 46" and a maximum age of 20. Dan used a Beverton–Holt equilibrium model to examine females ≥ 30 ". Observed exploitation ranged from 8 to 10% from 2001 – 2007; angler harvest was assumed to be 0, so this was all spring tribal harvest. Two scenarios resulted in substantially different size structures: Under no exploitation, 2% of the population reached 45"+ and 11% reached 40"+; with 10% exploitation, none reached 45"+ and 5-6% reached 40"+. This pretty much matches what is seen currently in the population. Some unknowns include: angler release mortality (which contributes to exploitation); a better estimate of sex-specific exploitation; more age and growth data. Some ideas were discussed, such as working with tribes and taking the issue of the regression model to the FM Board as an issue brief for TWG. S. Gilbert and T. Margenau will draft an issue brief for our review and transmittal to FMB.

Terry Margenau presented some information on winter spearing activity on Bone Lake this winter. Bone recently went to a 50" minimum length limit, and is similar to Trout Lake, in terms of spring tribal harvest (it's a large lake dependent on stocking). Apparently, a group of locals has been interviewing tribal spearkers this winter and they have documented 171 fish speared through the ice so far this season. They are seeing some large (46"–47") fish taken. A long-standing issue has been winter spearing. It was not treated differently from angling in the court decision. There seem to be some instances where harvest may be considerable. The maximum exploitation agreed to in court was 26%. Gilbert and Margenau will draft an issue brief for team review and transmittal to FMB.

Simplifying Musky Regulations – As discussed in previous meetings, the committee intends to move forward with a rule proposal for a 40" minimum length limit statewide, to replace the 34" minimum. This is part of an attempt to move towards simplification of the categories. The goal is to have 3 categories – No minimum, 40" minimum (statewide default), and 50" minimum (trophy). Currently, about 25% of our waters are at 40". We discussed the supporting information that should be contained in the proposal, including average length at first reproduction (36"), length at full maturity (40"), rules simplification, average ultimate length, particularly in smaller lakes, budget implications (cost/fish), concept of recycling fish/having fish in the system longer, angler opinion survey (< 1% consider 40" a trophy; would you support a higher minimum). Once this proposal is written up, it will have to be approved by the FMB. Then we can rally the troops in support of the proposal. Simonson will write up the paper work and get it back out the committee. Rule proposals are generally due in summer.

Musky Angler Questionnaire – We again discussed the survey questionnaire, which we have conducted every 10 years. I have submitted a project proposal, which should be reviewed for funding in mid-April. We would like to include a few "current topics" questions, but the bulk of the survey should be repeated so we can evaluate trends. A couple options were perceptions on release mortality, 40" statewide length limit. Here are the results from the [2000 survey](#) – please provide comments to Tim Simonson on this survey. We discussed the option of an online survey. This should be looked into. Dan Isermann and Terry Margenau volunteered to help coordinate this effort, along with Jordan Petchenik from research. I did discover that Wildlife Management has a public survey on the web right now using "survey monkey" web site. Not sure the costs associated with this or if Jordan is involved but Terry

and Dan can figure this out, once we know if the funding is approved. If not approved, perhaps we could get the musky clubs alliance to help with funding?

Updating WDNR Musky Publications – Muskellunge-related publications are in need of revision and updating:

1. [Muskellunge FYI sheet \(1989 Mecozzi\)](#) – Steve Gilbert will take the lead with revisions to combine these two [publications](#) into one. At a minimum, we will update the web version. It would be nice to have a printed supply, but that may have to be done by individual offices (e.g., Kinko's) as the need arises.
2. [Wisconsin Muskellunge Waters \(1996\)](#) – Simonson will work on this document, particularly the lists of waters, with the idea of re-designating our “trophy” waters (class A1 waters) based on their actual potential to produce number of large fish ≥ 48 ”. We have previously discussed developing criteria for these waters, so we can use that to re-do the list. Dan Isermann volunteered to help with the narrative sections of the booklet.
3. Muskellunge Wild Card – I can't remember who was going to work on this (Gilbert?).

These publications should be updated and overlapping information should be consistent among publications.

Musky Tag/Stamp – Various external partners have expressed a desire to have the department develop a “musky stamp” or “musky tag”. First, we are not authorized to create a stamp or a tagging system – this requires legislation. The first question that needs to be answered: what would be the purpose of the stamp/tag. In most cases, it seems the desires are to 1) generate dedicated funds for muskellunge management, and 2) reduce harvest. Our primary goal, from a biological perspective, is having a more accurate method of measuring harvest. There are essentially three options that are already in use with other species, which provide models for successful efforts. All of these options will require legislation. 1) Stamps (e.g., Trout Stamp - \$10) provide dedicated funding to statutorily defined program areas and provide a measure of the number of anglers pursuing the species. Stamps provide no measure of harvest. Dedicated funding may be less than current expenditures. 2) Tags (e.g., Sturgeon Hook and Line tag - \$20) provide dedicated funding, provide an accurate measure of harvest, but may not provide a complete measure of the number of anglers pursuing muskellunge. 3) Permit (e.g., Canada Goose permit - \$3) provides no dedicated funding, an accurate measure of harvest, but may not provide a complete measure of musky anglers. One other example (Wild Turkey) was mentioned, for which you need a license, stamp, and tag!!!! After discussion, the committee was leaning toward a stamp plus the harvest permit. There are still concerns that having stamps or tags available to all patron license holders will muddy our ability to accurately assess the number of actual muskellunge anglers. Also concerns that having a stamp for anglers “fishing for muskellunge” may be difficult to enforce when people are pursuing other similar species (e.g., large northern pike).

UWSP Muskellunge Research Update - Todd Caspers provided an update of his thesis research. Todd modeled muskellunge stock recruitment relationships and examined the differences between stocked and natural reproducing populations. Many of the stocked populations had some level of natural reproduction, so they would be considered “supplemental stocking”. Todd found that age-0 abundance was related to adult abundance using the Ricker stock-recruit model. He found that lakes in stocked years had higher levels

of age-0 abundance than in non-stocked years, indicating that stocking increased YOY abundance by about 0.3 fish/mile. Recruitment peaked at about 1 adult/acre and averaged about 0.7 YOY/mile in natural lakes/years and 1 YOY/mile in stocked lakes/years.

Sucker Fishing Regulations – There are concerns related to hooking/handling/delayed mortality, and these concerns are even greater with the use of live bait. There is interest in reviving the original proposal we put together which banned single-hook sucker fishing. This proposal was approved as an advisory question but never followed up on as a rule proposal. The committee agreed to dust this proposal off, sent it out for **review** ([Quick Strike Rigs proposal](#)), and submit it as a rule change next year (2010).

Summer 2009 Meeting – It was proposed that we meet during the last week of July in Lacrosse. This would be in conjunction with the NCD AFS Technical committees, which are meeting there that week (and many of our members will already be there). We would plan to meet the 30th and 31st (Thursday – Friday) in the Lacrosse area. This has yet to be finalized. Please let me know if this would work for you before we make this definite.

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