

Mille Lacs walleye quota: No change

GLIFWC: Walleye allocation to be 40,000 pounds, again

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Isle, Minn. — When it comes to the amount of Lake Mille Lacs walleyes that state anglers will be allowed to kill during the upcoming open-water season, most business interests around the central-Minnesota lake were expecting what a Great Lakes Indian Fish and wildlife Commission official confirmed this week: an allocation similar to last year.

Dylan Jennings, GLIFWC public information director, said Tuesday the total allocation (state anglers and tribal members) would be 40,000 pounds this year, which is what it was a year ago. Last year, the state was granted 28,600 pounds of fish; eight tribes shared 11,400 pounds.

That resulted in a 2015 open-water walleye regulation of one fish between 19 and 21 inches (or one over 28 inches) for state anglers. Night fishing (10 p.m. to 6 a.m.) for walleyes was dosed. Don Pereira, DNR Fisheries chief, said this week that the department has internally begun to look at options for fishing regulations.

For businesses that cater to state-licensed anglers, one wish probably tops the list for 2016: a state angling season that doesn't abruptly shut down, as walleye fishing did last August when the state's allocation of fish was about to be surpassed.

"All options are on the table," Dean Hanson, of Agate Bay Resort near Isle, said earlier this

week regarding keeping the season open all year.

Specifically, Hanson referred to what's known as "hooking mortality"--the number of walleyes estimated to die following catch and release by anglers, as determined by DNR researchers who review creel (survey) information. Last August, the DNR said heavier than expected fishing pressure in early July and warmer water than usual combined to cause hooking mortality to skyrocket.

From winter through June 2015, state fishers had killed via harvest and hooking mortality about 3,500 pounds of fish. During the first two weeks of July alone, that kill was estimated to be about 12,500 pounds. Of that, an estimated 10,500 pounds was hooking mortality. Water temps in the 132,000-acre Jake usually peak during late July and early August.

Hanson said hooking mortality and various numbers extrapolated from creel surveys were to be discussed at a meeting of the Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Group that was scheduled for Thursday (after Outdoor News press time). Open-water fishing regulations will come up at a meeting in February.

Part of the reason for a gathering dedicated to those matters is the distrust of business owners in the department's hooking mortality and creel estimates. Few believe fishing pressure was what the

DNR indicated it was during early July, for example.

"We just really have some issues," Hanson said.

Pereira said he understands the concerns that have been expressed, and considers them legitimate.

"We're keeping an open mind," he said.

That said, the primary goal of upcoming regulations should be to ensure walleye fishing doesn't close, à la last season, Hanson said.

In the past, things like special hooks and bait restrictions have been offered as means to reduce the delayed killing of walleyes. They'll likely be offered again, but Hanson expects more.

"It will be a whole lotta things, not just circle hooks and artificial bait," he said of possibilities. Others might include a temporary season closure during the hottest portion of summer.

"I think we need to go back to square one and look at a lot of options," Hanson said.

Jennings said the Mille Lacs Band, Fond du Lac Band, and six bands from Wisconsin whose members harvest Mille Lacs walleyes haven't announced their plans for the upcoming year. Mille Lacs officials last July did announce they planned not to net walleyes on the lake this year to let the lake's fish recover, though the spearing of fish remained on the table. Tribal

members didn't exceed their allocation last year.

Hanson said he and others believe the walleye-fishing season shouldn't have been closed last year, as it was by a DNR Commissioner's Order. That order stated Minnesota was obligated by a federal court decision "to abide by the limit agreed upon with the eight Chippewa bands for each year."

Legislator's take, and what's ahead

State Rep. Tom Hackbarth, R-Cedar, attended the "closed" technical meeting last week between state and tribal officials, as he has done in the past.

"They moved along pretty much as they normally do," Hackbarth said following the two-day affair. He said there were "absolutely no surprises whatsoever."

Hackbarth said the topic of walleye stocking was discussed. Pereira said this week the current plan is to stock 5 million to 10 million walleye fry in the lake this spring



Rep. Tom Hackbarth

Spawning Mille Lacs walleyes will be stripped this spring, and the eggs hatched at a facility in St. Paul. The fry stocked will be "marked" for future evaluation, Pereira added.

The eggs will come from Mille Lacs walleyes to ensure continuity of the unique genetic strain of the lake's fish, he said.

Gov. Mark Dayton also has included in his bonding proposal for 2016 \$3.5 million for a facility on the lake. The facility

would staff personnel whose duties would range from public information to fisheries research.

But not so fast, Hackbarth, a member of the House Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Finance Committee, said of the financial commitment.

"Personally, I don't think it's gonna make it (the bonding proposal for Mille Lacs), and I don't think it should make it," he said.

Hackbarth called Mille Lacs "unique," adding that the DNR should wait to see what happens with the thus-far impressive 2013 year-class of walleyes.

"It's more about (tribal) netting than anything else," he added.

Regarding the proposed facility, he said, "I think the DNR is going down the wrong path here."