

## **Mille Lacs: DNR's terrible disconnect, and what comes next?**

**By Joe Fellegy    Outdoor News    April 4, 2014**

The latest round of DNR-generated horrific Mille Lacs news—controversial regulations and scary messages—has triggered record levels of public concern and disgust.

Call it a firestorm. Announcements about record-low walleye “safe allowable harvests” (quotas) and radical angling regs for pike, bass, and walleyes, have most Mille Lacs-connected folks and many others statewide wondering how crazy and hurtful the “Mille Lacs mess” can get.

A common theme: distrust of DNR and state government high-ups who remain more loyal to a flawed system than to their own citizen-stakeholders and a Minnesota resource treasure. Who really runs the show, people ask. Indeed, they've made Mille Lacs the biggest political football and media spectacle in Minnesota's fishing-tourism history.

DNR's hype about eco-system complexities shouldn't distract from the big issues they minimize: spawning-time tribal gill-net fishing (grounded in political decisions, not mandated by treaties or courts) and the related “treaty fisheries management.” Gone-mad public policy brings unbearable costs, harmed constituents, and citizen outrage—now at a boiling point. How will state government proceed?

Meanwhile, the new Mille Lacs walleye quotas and angling regs sure have 'em talking!

**Pike explosion?**        Wow! A 10-pike limit. Darkhouse pike-spearing revived on waters famed for trophy pike and *muskies*. Pike season extended a month. What a political rats' nest dumped on Mille Lacs! Maybe DNR should seek Legacy money to buy anglers pike-proof body armor and reinforced bite-proof gloves, and special spears with digital fish-measuring devices accurate to the quarter-inch. And how about multi-directional cameras for distinguishing northerns from muskies?

Do a couple above-average year-classes of tiny pike justify radical “pro-active” management? Creel surveys show no upward trend in angler catch rates. Heavy-duty Mille Lacs anglers who target pike, or cast all day for smallies, or fish walleyes deep and shallow in all seasons, report no onslaught of pesky pike. The Feb. 22 Ducks Unlimited contest on Garrison Bay drew thousands of anglers, but the

top 100 placements included no pike.

**Smallmouth bass regs** Enter Mille Lacs bass regs and more extremist bass politics. Last season, after years of unreasoned protection of smallies under 21 inches and a limit of one, DNR jumped to the statewide limit of six, with a 17-20 protected slot and one over 20 inches. Bass pros yelped. Enter 2014. Mille Lacs bass fishing starts on the May 10 walleye opener. The limit is six (smallmouth and largemouth combined), with one smallie over 18 inches. Now exempt from the statewide mid-September no-keep reg, Mille Lacs smallies may be caught and kept through Feb. 22, 2015.

Will anglers keep enough smallies to wiggle a statistical needle? Unlikely. But last year bass protectionists via [savemillelacssmallies.org](http://savemillelacssmallies.org) predicted Mille Lacs launches alone would devastate the smallies: "20 launches multiplied by 20 people per launch, multiplied by six fish per person, equals the potential harvest of 2,400 smallmouth per day!" With three trips a day, the "devastating" *daily* harvest could hit 7,200, said [savemillelacssmallies.org](http://savemillelacssmallies.org). And that's just launches. Get real! DNR's estimated total 2013 Mille Lacs smallmouth harvest was about 1,850 fish out of 75,000 caught. A nothing.

**'Hooking mortality' scam** DNR and tribal co-managers set annual "safe allowable harvests" (quotas) on Mille Lacs walleyes. In guesstimating angler kill, DNR adds "hooking mortality" to the catch-and-keep figure. The more Mille Lacs walleye anglers catch and release, the more they're punished with hooking mortality. Sure, sport-fishing waters have bag limits, size restrictions, tourney rules, and voluntary release—call it conservation—and some released fish croak. But, except at Mille Lacs, the focus is on the majority survivors. Well-traveled anglers who fish all over the United States can't name a lake, other than Mille Lacs, with hooking-mortality worries. Thank "co-operative treaty management."

**Not 'common sense'** Given DNR's concern about lower-than-usual numbers of Mille Lacs walleyes under 20 inches, angler-biologists pitch their "common sense" ideas, like allowing three fish over 20 inches. But treaty management's emphasis is on total *pounds*. If just three anglers in one boat kept nine 24-inch walleyes, they'd tally 40 pounds or more. Anglers lakeside would quickly exceed the state's allowable harvest.

**A resource and 'heritage' surrender!** Many Minnesotans are unaware that their state government has, in a real sense, surrendered

half the Mille Lacs fish resource plus half the state's management authority over a huge state asset—with all the economics, culture, and Minnesota outdoor heritage that attach. The ridiculous 50-50 state-tribal pike and perch allocations have long been in play. Several years ago tribal managers noted they could go for 50 percent of the annual safe harvest level (SHL) on walleyes too. In our recent exchange, Don Pereira, DNR Fisheries Chief, affirmed the system: "The Bands' declaration is deducted from the total SHL and the balance is for State anglers. If the Bands' declaration is greater than half the SHL, then they are reduced to half the SHL."

Surely the 1998 Hunting and Fishing Amendment to Minnesota's Constitution, as well as the 2008 Legacy Amendment, didn't cut half the Mille Lacs fishery, traditionally Minnesota's largest, from Minnesota's outdoor heritage or from state management responsibility. Maybe DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr, Attorney General Lori Swanson, Governor Mark Dayton, and legislators on House and Senate natural-resources committees can elaborate.