

Safe-Harvest Politics

Anglers have long suspected that the DNR was giving away too much of the walleye quota—now we know just how much.

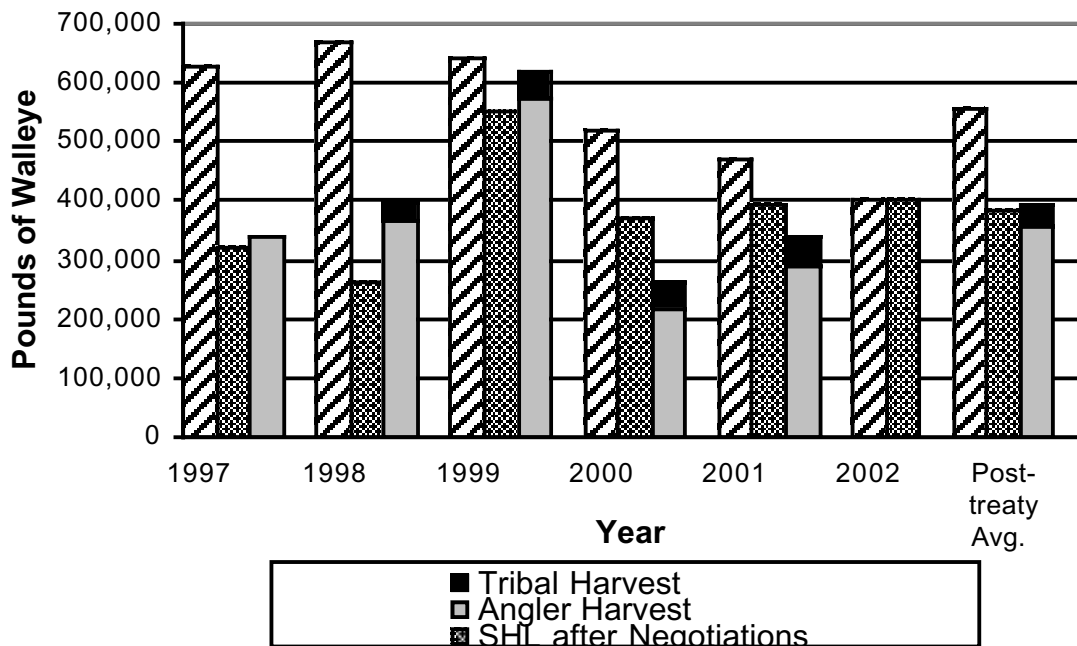
Since the advent of “treaty management” in 1997, The Mille Lacs walleye harvest has been subject to a court-approved allocation system that puts a 24 percent cap on the poundage of catchable size walleye that can be removed from the lake each year. That number, which includes all forms of sport and tribal harvest, is called the safe harvest level (SHL) and is the basis for setting the fishing regulations.

Each year, the DNR calculates the SHL based on a population estimate derived from its computer model. But the number must be approved by tribal biologists who generally argue for a lower number, even though they have practically no data of their own to support their case. Anglers have always suspected that the DNR was giving in to tribal demands and lowering the SHL, but no one knew exactly how much was being cut.

Data recently released to Dick Sternberg, who is studying the Mille Lacs walleye management plan on behalf of the Mille Lacs landowners, reveals that the SHL cuts have been much deeper than anyone expected. The graph below shows the DNR’s post-treaty SHL proposals, the SHL after negotiations, and what the actual walleye harvest was in each year.

In the first five years of treaty management (1997-2001), the average annual harvest cut after negotiations with the Bands was 207,000 pounds and the largest cut was a staggering 410,000 pounds (from 670,000 pounds down to 260,000 pounds in 1998). And even though the DNR says the walleye population is holding up well, the SHL has fallen by an average of 54,000 pounds in each of the last five years. Only in 2002, when the DNR’s SHL proposal reached its lowest point (400,000 pounds), did the Bands not negotiate it downward.

Safe Harvest Levels vs. Actual Harvest

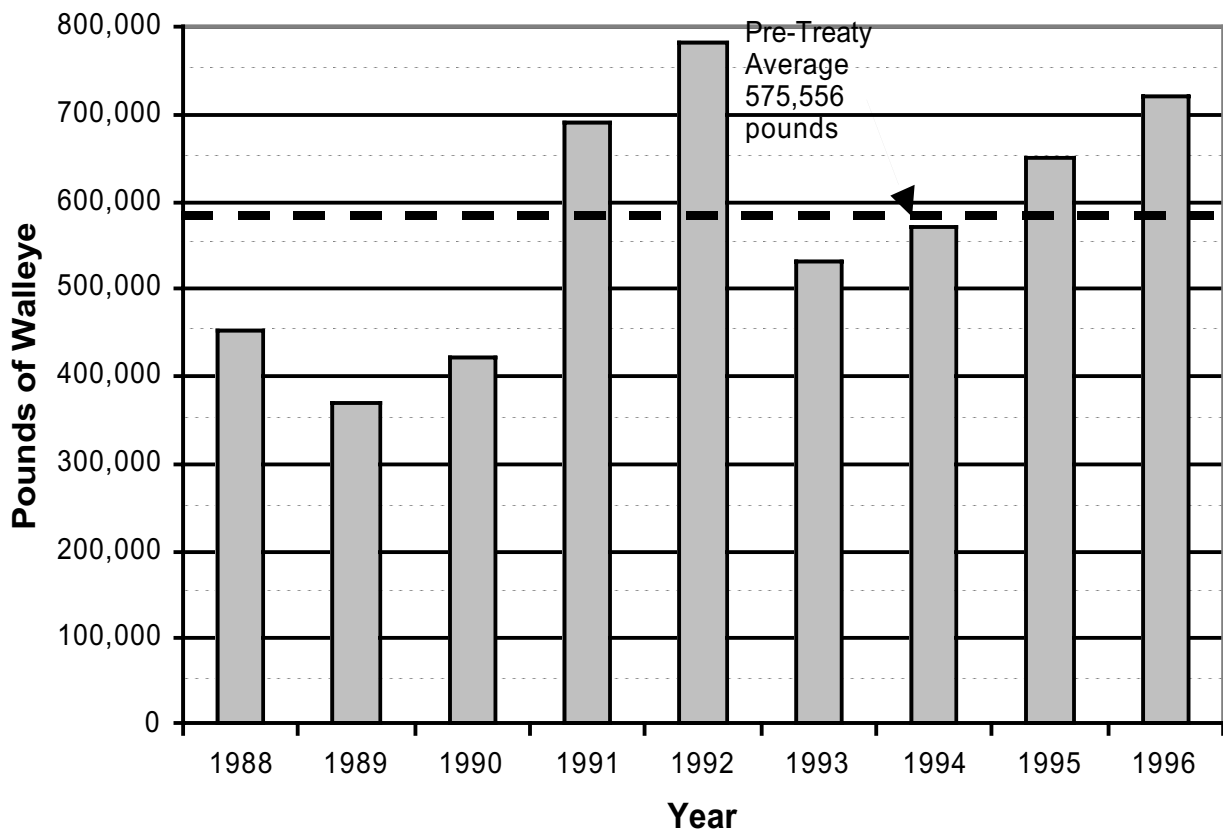


In the first three years of treaty management, the walleye harvest exceeded the SHL, prompting the DNR to establish tighter slot limits that have greatly reduced the harvest in recent years. But even though the 3-year harvest was 20 percent higher than the negotiated SHL, it was still 30 percent lower than what the DNR believed the maximum harvest should be. For the entire post-treaty period, the actual walleye harvest has exceeded the negotiated SHL by 2 percent, but it has been 29 percent below the DNR's SHL.

Pre-Treaty SHLs

To help establish a reference point for post-treaty management, Sternberg requested the DNR to use their model to back-calculate what the SHL would have been in the pre-treaty years. The DNR agreed to do so and, as the following graph shows, their pre-treaty SHL estimates averaged 575,556 pounds per year in the 9-year period from 1988-96. This is 30 percent higher than the 440,000 pounds the DNR now says that Mille Lacs can produce on a sustained basis. Even if the slightly lower post-treaty SHLs are averaged in, the DNR's 15-year SHL average is still 567,333 pounds.

Pre-Treaty Safe Harvest Level



Taking all of the DNR's data into consideration, it appears that a reasonable long-term SHL for Mille Lacs Lake is in the 550,000- to 600,000-pound range, which corresponds with the actual pre-treaty walleye harvest of 592,000 pounds. This new data adds great credence to arguments of those who say the DNR's recent regulations are unreasonably tight and are contributing to a build-up of large walleyes that has decimated the baitfish crop and endangered the lake's biological health.

The fact that the DNR has slashed their proposed SHL the last five years and are now recommending SHLs considerably below their own long-term average brings up some obvious questions: Are the reductions a result of real changes in the walleye population or pressure from the Bands? And if the DNR believes the population has plummeted enough to warrant these cuts, why haven't they explained this to the angling public?