

## **Mille Lacs committee gets some good news**

By Javier Serna     **Outdoor News, Vol. 51, No. 45**

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Isle, Minn. — The Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Committee on Monday night received in-depth presentations regarding the recently completed walleye population estimate and fall assessment from the big lake.

The committee meeting was held at McQuoid's Inn and gave lake interests a look ahead to the prospect of the first state open water walleye harvest on the lake in four years – something that could occur next summer.

Only seven members of the 15-member citizen committee were present for the final scheduled meeting before state and tribal fisheries managers convene in January to negotiate a safe allowable harvest for the improving fishery (an eighth member was present via conference call).

Brad Parsons, Minnesota DNR Fisheries chief, explained the winter regulations that were announced Oct. 30. This winter, ice anglers will be allowed to keep a single walleye between 21 and 23 inches, or one over 28 inches.

“We talked about other options that were possible,” said Parsons, who elaborated on why that harvest slot was chosen. “It targets more females, where there is an increase in the population. It also starts tapping into the 2013-year class. The negative, that (size) is starting to be a pretty good fish. It adds up fast (poundage), and some people don't want to eat a fish that size.”

While committee members didn't say much about a winter regulation that was probably expected to be a single fish by most observers, Parsons said he's received little pushback about it from committee members and no complaints from the public.

“I am not going to say that (all committee members) are accepting of the regulation, but I think the rationale for it is understood,” he said.

Committee chair Dean Hanson, owner of Agate Bay Resort, asked if fisheries managers are finally ready to harvest some of the heralded 2013 class of walleyes.

“Is your intention in the next few years to start harvesting more of them?” Hanson asked.

Parsons responded, “Given where they are, more of them will be harvested.”

The DNR has been apprehensive about allowing anglers to target those fish, which were viewed previously as the only strong year class of up-and-coming spawners in the lake. That's not aligned with a local push to allow some harvest of the abundant year-class the past three years, when state anglers had to throw everything back and saw the season end early twice after the state's quota was met via estimated hooking mortality.

That could finally be relieved, as the latest fisheries data collected suggest a walleye population three times the size from the last assessment and, finally, another substantial, though still average, year-class at about the two-year mark – the 2016 walleyes.

Tom Heinrich, the DNR's Garrison-area fisheries supervisor, reviewed with the committee the walleye population estimate and the fall assessment, both of which showed promising signs for the fishery, following several years of restrictive regulations.

Heinrich explained the catch-release-recapture method the DNR uses to come up with its population estimate. That final estimate was 727,000 walleyes (of at least 14 inches) or about three times the number of walleyes that were estimated in the last evaluation in 2014. About 400,000 of those were estimated to be females.

Committee member Tony Roach asked Heinrich why the DNR didn't estimate walleyes the way wildlife managers do roadside counts for pheasants, as the water has been so clear the past few years. Clarity is about 15 feet, he said.

"I don't know if it would be useful or not, but it seems to me there are a lot of walleyes in shallow," Roach said. "I don't see why you couldn't do that with walleyes."

Heinrich said it could probably be done to come up with an index of abundance but maybe not a population estimate.

"The issue is, the water is very clear," he said. "You could possibly get into some issues with varying visibility. ... You could have a very different count."

Roach countered that the water has been consistently clear the past five years.

The good news is, DNR officials said, that the 2016 year-class of walleyes, now about 13 to 15 inches long, is appearing to be an average year-class – only the second year-class that was at least that good since 2008.

The 2017 year-class is looking even better in the young-of-year walleye and forage assessments, but it's still too early to know how much of a contribution those walleyes will make. That's because managers say they don't feel comfortable about that until the fish reach the two-year mark, because many year-classes have looked promising initially but then disappeared largely by age 2.

"It doesn't seem to matter how many young-of-year walleyes we have in our nets," Heinrich said. "That doesn't seem to correlate with how well a year-class it is. There are a lot of factors that happen to them in their first two years of life."

Parsons interjected to point out that if walleyes don't show up initially in forage nets, they tend to not show up later, either. But he agreed that if they show up big during the first two years, they still might disappear later, as they have so many times in the last decade.

Heinrich said the DNR estimated 233 natural fry produced in 2016 and 440 million natural fry produced in 2017. The estimate for 2018 has not yet been calculated.

That assessment also gauges the amount of forage in the lake, and this year, the lowest amount of forage turned up in the nets since 2012. That has some anglers, including Roach, scratching their heads, because low forage is also associated with poorer condition of walleyes, and many anglers have noted that the walleyes have looked plenty healthy as of late.

"I saw way less baitfish last fall," Roach said. "The fish look way more healthy this fall."

But DNR data indicate a declining condition. And if baitfish are low in the lake, not only will walleyes look less full, but anglers would expect to experience another excellent bite like the one two winters ago.

But more on committee members' minds is the next open water season, when it's hoped that state anglers will finally be able to keep some walleyes. Parsons was attempting to find out what mattered most to those committee members.

Ideas such as ending the night ban on fishing, or at least expanding the hours when anglers may fish were discussed, as was the idea of opening up harvest midseason, as might have been done this summer when it appeared that state anglers wouldn't come close to reaching the quota in a catch-and-release-only season.

“Those are things we need to talk about,” said Parsons, who talked about the complexities of opening up harvest midseason.

Hanson agreed that it could be complex to do so, but it’s done when it’s the other way around and the quota is in danger of being met. Hanson later pointed out that the bands generally don’t meet their quota, and wondered if it was possible for the state to purchase some of those fish. Parsons said the bands have generally not been interested in that, but such an idea could be proposed again.

Resort owner and committee member Bill Eno pushed for at least one more hour of fishing in the evenings, closing it at 11 p.m. instead of 10. “Eleven is far better with traffic jams and late arrivals,” Eno said.

While Parsons tried to point out that opening up regulations will lead to an increase in the amount of pressure, committee member Steve Johnson said at some point “you need to do it and try it.”

Whatever regulations might be on the table, Parsons refused to talk about how much the state’s allowance of walleyes might be increased next year.

“Speculating on the safe harvest level for next year? I’m not ready to do that,” he said.