

2022 DNR Fisheries Management Advisory Questions

1. Northern Zone muskellunge season structure

The current Southern Zone (inland waters south of Highway 10/Waldo Blvd) season runs from the first Saturday in May to Dec. 31 (ice angling allowed), and the Northern Zone (inland waters north of Highway 10, Waldo Blvd—excluding WI/MN boundary waters) season runs from the Saturday prior to Memorial Day to Dec. 31 (on open water only-ice angling prohibited). The proposed season structure is an open harvest season running from the first Saturday in May to December 31 on open water only, which would apply statewide and would eliminate the need for muskellunge zones.

This proposal would apply a uniform season structure for muskellunge in Wisconsin. It would not change the daily bag limit of 1 fish at least 40" in total length. It would also eliminate the need for muskellunge zones and would simplify regulations. It would include an "open water only" component which would change the southern zone rule to no longer allow ice angling for muskellunge prior to Dec 31. A citizen resolution was introduced in Vilas and Oneida Counties in 2019 and a Conservation Congress advisory question to change the season to the first Saturday in May with May being catch and release for muskellunge in the Northern Zone was supported by spring hearing attendees in 2020.

The management goal is to simplify regulations and to provide additional angling opportunity for muskellunge. Under the current zonal system there are two separate muskellunge harvest openers. In the South Zone, anglers can legally fish muskellunge beginning the first Saturday in May, while in the North Zone they cannot legally target muskellunge until the Saturday before Memorial Day. This system has been in place for over 50 years. Common reasoning for the current rule includes protection of fish during the spawn and fear of illegal capture via foul hooking. However, there is a lack of sufficient published research available to support these reasons. Furthermore, studies like Flink et. al. 2021 (*Fisheries*) indicate that angling for naturally reproducing spawning pike (a very closely related species) had no adverse effects at a population level.

Wisconsin also currently has a year-round catch-and-release season for bass. This season allows anglers to target bass statewide all year long. At times anglers may claim to be fishing for bass while attempting to catch and release muskellunge, walleye, or northern pike during traditionally closed seasons. Opening the muskellunge season statewide at the same time as other gamefish seasons leads to simplified regulations and more angling opportunity.

1. Do you favor implementing a standard season structure statewide (including boundary waters and the Great Lakes) for muskellunge with opening day of the harvest season beginning the first Saturday in May and extending to December 31 in open water only?

1. Yes__ No__ No opinion__

2. Walleye statewide bag limit

Walleye, sauger, and their hybrids are managed with a variety of site-specific regulations throughout Wisconsin, but the current standard outside of the Wisconsin Ceded Territory is a 5-fish daily bag limit for walleye, sauger, and their hybrids, with a 15-inch minimum length limit. The 5-fish daily bag limit

standard has been in place since 1949, with length limits being more commonly adjusted to manage walleye and sauger harvest in the intervening years, notably becoming more restrictive after 1989. The distribution of sauger in Wisconsin is generally restricted to the state's large river systems; where walleye and sauger co-occur in the state the species are typically managed together under the same bag limit.

In 2015, a region-wide 3-fish daily bag limit was established for walleye in the Wisconsin Ceded Territory (comprising the northern 1/3 of the state), and more recently, the Winnebago system adopted a 3-walleye/sauger daily bag limit. Additionally, all waters in six southeastern counties (Kenosha, Racine, Sheboygan, Walworth, Washington, Waukesha) and two east-central counties (Shawano and Waupaca) have 3-walleye/sauger daily bag limits. Many other individual waters outside these areas also have a 3-daily bag limit for walleye and sauger.

Recent public opinion surveys and other outreach related to an update of Wisconsin's Walleye Management Plan found that significant public concern exists about increasing angling pressure and harvest of walleye in regions where bag limits remain at 5 walleye/sauger per day.

This proposal is to gauge support for reducing the standard daily bag limit for walleye, sauger, and their hybrids on all inland waters from 5 per day (combined walleye/sauger/hybrids) to 3 per day (combined walleye/sauger/hybrids). Great lakes and border waters would not be included in this change and some may continue to have bag limits that are higher than 3.

2. Do you favor a statewide walleye bag limit of 3 per day on all inland waters? Bag limits for Great Lakes (including Green Bay) and Wisconsin-Iowa, Wisconsin-Minnesota, and Wisconsin-Michigan boundary waters would be unchanged, as would any water with a bag limit currently lower than 3.

2. Yes___ No___ No opinion___

3. Walleye rehabilitation regulation

The Wisconsin DNR currently uses an 18-inch minimum length limit and 3-fish daily bag limit or 28-inch minimum length limit and 1-fish daily bag limit in walleye population rehabilitation scenarios. Rehabilitation may be needed for a variety of reasons, including reduced natural reproduction and/or decreasing adult density. In these cases, a rehabilitation regulation is intended to reduce harvest and protect adult walleye long enough to give them several chances to spawn before becoming available to harvest.

However, recent data suggest that different harvest restrictions may be more appropriate in walleye population rehabilitation situations. Ideally, a new rehabilitation regulation would reduce harvest and allow adult abundance to increase, without totally closing harvest opportunities if such complete closure is not warranted. In most cases other rehabilitation actions (stocking, habitat evaluations and improvements, etc.) would be expected to accompany a rehabilitation regulation.

A regulation consisting of a minimum length limit of 18 inches, protected slot (no harvest) from 22-28 inches, and daily bag limit of 1 is proposed to allow walleye to reach spawning size while providing some limited opportunities for harvest.

3. Would you favor the DNR adding a rehabilitation regulation to the management toolbox that reads as follows: 18” minimum length limit, no harvest of walleye from 22-28 inches, and a 1-daily bag limit (allows harvest of one total walleye, either between 18-22 inches or over 28 inches).

3. Yes___ No___ No
opinion___

4. Data collection on small fishing tournaments

Over the past few years, the DNR has noted an uptick in the number of complaints and conflict reports regarding small, unpermitted fishing tournaments in some regions. Permits are required for tournaments with 20 or more boats, 100 or more participants, off-site weigh-ins, total prize values over \$10,000, those that target trout, those that allow culling of bass, or those that allow an expanded bag limit. Permitted tournaments are capped by maximum numbers of tournament boat days per month by waterbody size (except for Lake Michigan, Green Bay, Lake Superior, and Lake Winnebago which have no limits), but small tournaments fall below these thresholds and are not tracked by DNR or included in calculations toward monthly caps. Public reports have pointed to an observed increase in the number of small tournaments and in user conflicts both at crowded boat landings and on the water. State statute authorizes the DNR to promulgate rules that regulate fishing tournaments to control overcrowding, prevent unsafe conditions, and prevent user conflicts. If DNR were to pursue any changes to these regulations, the first step would be to collect information on the number and frequency of small fishing tournaments on Wisconsin waters. A mandatory self-registration system would enable this data collection. If small tournaments cumulatively account for substantial tournament pressure, the DNR may pursue additional regulations including requiring a free, general permit for small tournaments but restricting the total number of tournaments or participants on a waterbody per month. Future proposed regulations would go through the advisory question process after this initial data collection period.

4. Would you support the DNR implementing a mandatory self-registration system for small tournaments that could be used to collect data on the number and types of small tournaments and participants across Wisconsin waters?

4. Yes___ No___ No
opinion___

5. Personal bait harvest of minnows on VHS-affected waters

Since 2008, it has been illegal to use nets or traps to collect minnows in any waters suspected to be infected with the fish disease Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS), or in any connected waters not separated by a barrier that is impassable to fish. VHS has been positively identified in Lake Michigan, Lake Superior and Lake Winnebago, and is suspected to be present in waters of the Mississippi River, the segment of the Wisconsin River upstream to the Prairie du Sac Dam, which is connected to the Mississippi River, and the Fox River between Lake Winnebago and Green Bay.

Rules currently in place prevent the spread of VHS through infected fish and water to waterbodies without VHS by prohibiting movement of minnows away from these waterbodies, unless the minnows were purchased from a bait dealer (covered under a health certificate) and have not been exposed to any fish or water from that VHS-affected waterbody. These rules are a compromise that emerged from

discussions among the Natural Resources Board, Legislature and the public on addressing VHS in Wisconsin, and allow “unused” minnows purchased from a bait dealer to be used on other waterbodies while minimizing the risk of spreading VHS.

However, prohibiting the movement of live minnows away from the VHS-affected waterbody of harvest regardless of the source of the minnows would allow anglers to harvest their own bait from these waters and use purchased bait while also ensuring that no infected minnows or water will be spread to other waterbodies. Prohibiting the movement of live minnows also minimizes the risk of spreading aquatic invasive species, such as invasive carp, that negatively affect fish communities and the ecosystem. Small invasive carp in particular are very difficult to distinguish from golden shiners and several other native minnow species. Over 50 invasive carp were captured in the Mississippi River in 2021, spurring ongoing monitoring and mitigation efforts.

Since 2010, the department has received periodic requests to review these rules and allow more opportunities for personal bait harvest from VHS-affected waters. This rule change would allow personal collection and use of minnows on all VHS-affected waters, but to be enforceable, no live minnows, including “unused” minnows purchased from a bait dealer, could be transported away from these waters. A new rule may include requirements to disinfect minnow harvesting gear before moving it to another waterbody. In addition, consistent with current rules, no commercial bait harvest by bait dealers from VHS-affected waters would be allowed.

5. Do you support allowing personal bait harvest of minnows from VHS-affected waters, using legal nets and traps, as long as no live minnows are moved away from the waterbody of harvest regardless of source of the minnows?	5. Yes___	No___	No opinion___
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6 – 7. Sturgeon hook and line season opportunities

Lake sturgeon hook and line opportunities in Wisconsin vary based on location. Lake sturgeon can legally be targeted on specified inland waters and WI/MI boundary waters with hook and line during the hook and line harvest season which runs from the first Saturday in September to September 30. It is illegal to target lake sturgeon, including for catch and release, on other inland waters or outside the hook and line harvest season on specified waters. On Wisconsin-Minnesota border waters the season varies depending on location, but in general is more liberal and encompasses approximately a 9-month catch and release season, which excludes the spring timeframe to protect spawning fish. Additionally, there is no lake sturgeon season on WI/IA border waters, while on Lake Superior the season runs year-round.

Typical fishing methods used for targeting lake sturgeon are also used by catfish and rough fish anglers. Habitat utilization by lake sturgeon, catfish and rough fish overlap as well. Therefore, lake sturgeon are caught routinely during the closed season and it is difficult to determine if anglers are illegally targeting lake sturgeon during this time.

Recently, the DNR conducted a lake sturgeon hooking mortality study to determine if expanding sturgeon angling opportunities would have negative biological effects on their populations. This study took place on multiple lake sturgeon fisheries throughout the state and across a range of water temperatures. No lake sturgeon mortality was observed during the two-weeks post-angling event.

Additionally, physiological impacts of the angling event on individual sturgeon was low with a high proportion of individuals in all locations considered recovered immediately and not impaired post-angling. It is anticipated that expanding the catch and release opportunities will have very little, if any, negative impacts on lake sturgeon populations.

Lake sturgeon surveys conducted by the DNR around the state show strong sturgeon populations in most waterbodies where lake sturgeon exist. Surveys also have shown populations growing in size in waterbodies that previously had small or remnant populations of lake sturgeon.

Furthermore, expanding the catch and release season and standardizing regulations were identified as tactics under Objective 4.2 of the Wisconsin's Sturgeon Management Plan: 1.) Standardize sturgeon fishing regulations to the greatest degree possible; 2.) Use best available information to evaluate risks of expanding both harvest and catch and release opportunities for Lake Sturgeon. Options should include both opening new waters to hook and line angling and potential changes in season structure.

6. Do you favor creating a catch-and-release season for lake sturgeon on a subset of waterbodies already open to lake sturgeon hook and line harvest? This proposal would maintain the existing hook and line harvest season, and anglers would not need a harvest tag to catch and release lake sturgeon. 6. Yes__ No__ No opinion__

7. Would you support expanding hook and line catch-and-release opportunities to additional waters where lake sturgeon populations are determined to be healthy enough to support these activities? 7. Yes__ No__ No opinion__

8 – 10. St. Croix River (Wisconsin-Minnesota boundary waters) game fish regulation changes

The Minnesota and Wisconsin DNRs are jointly reviewing fishing regulations on the lower St. Croix River from Taylors Falls, MN/St. Croix Falls, WI, downstream to Prescott, WI. Bag and size limits on the border waters have been largely unchanged since the 1940s and 1950s. The last regulation changes in WI/MN waters were in 1990, when minimum size limits were implemented for Walleye (15 inches) and Bass (14 inches). For example, prior to 1980, Muskellunge and other species not specifically listed with border waters seasons and limits were regulated by the inland regulations of the state in which taken. Once a Muskellunge daily limit was established on MN/WI border waters in 1980, the daily limit of 1 has remained consistent while the harvest season varied over time, and the minimum length limit, originally set at 30 inches, has gradually increased. The most recent change in the Muskellunge minimum length limit occurred in 2015 when it increased to 50 inches.

The St. Croix River is a fertile river that contains a highly diverse and productive fishery despite increasing habitat alterations, pollution inputs, increasing urbanization and high fishing pressure. Currently, most fish species populations in the St. Croix provide great fishing and populations are generally stable and require no stocking with the exception of Muskellunge. However, adaptive management is necessary with the increases in fishing pressure and other stressors on the fishery including water quality, vegetation changes, and presence of invasive species. Invasive bighead and silver carp could also add additional stress to the fish community in the future. In addition to the diverse fishery, the river also boasts one of the most diverse native mussel communities in the region which are

heavily linked to the fish community present. Different fish species serve as the host for specific mussel species, which cannot complete their life cycle without a healthy fish population. Therefore, harvest rates of the fish populations must also be a consideration when evaluating the impacts to the native mussel communities.

Currently, the St. Croix River fishing season dates include a closed season for gamefish species which include Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye and Sauger. However, the current open season dates are different between these species which further complicates these regulations. Currently, the Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass open season runs from the Saturday preceding Memorial Day through March 1st while the open season for Northern Pike, Walleye and Sauger runs from the Saturday nearest May 1st through March 1st. The St. Croix River open seasons also differs from the current Mississippi River continuous open season. Simplifying these regulations and placing a continuous open season for gamefish on the St. Croix River would reduce confusion regarding the beginning of each species' open season and would enhance conservation warden's ability to enforce these regulations. This would also match the Mississippi River's current open continuous gamefish season further simplifying regulations.

Fishing regulations on the river have generally been more permissive (high bag limits, generous season on all species, etc.) than on inland waters of either state. Even though the fishery has held up well, there is concern among biologists and anglers that the fishery may not be able to withstand these stressors and high levels of harvest going into the future. The review of existing regulations is an opportunity to be proactive and potentially make adjustments that will protect the quality of the fishery and the fishing opportunities that currently exist. These regulation changes would also attempt to simplify border water regulations by matching the current regulations on the Mississippi River.

8. Would you support the Wisconsin DNR working with the Minnesota DNR to establish game fish regulations and a continuous season for the St. Croix River from Taylors Falls downstream to Prescott that are consistent with those of the Mississippi River?

8. Yes___ No___ No
opinion___

Channel and Flathead Catfish

Fisheries data show that Channel and Flathead Catfish populations are healthy; however, abundances of both species is low compared to statewide averages including the Mississippi River. The size structure of both species is high with trophy-sized catfish making up approximately 32% of the population for Flathead Catfish according to a recent survey. Catfish have historically been managed for high harvest, including commercial fishing. A recent tagging study indicated higher harvest rates of catfish in the St. Croix compared to upper Mississippi River pools in Minnesota. Large catfish, particularly Flathead Catfish, are a long-lived species that can attain large sizes and provide trophy fishing opportunities. Fish also become concentrated in late summer and winter months increasing their vulnerability to harvest. Flathead Catfish commonly reach a weight of over 50 pounds in the St. Croix River, which is by far the largest of any gamefish species in the river other than Lake Sturgeon. Flathead Catfish are also a top-level predator that could aid in controlling invasive carp. Channel catfish are the host species for the federally endangered Winged Mapleleaf Mussel which is currently only found in 5 rivers across the United States with the St. Croix being one of them. Flathead Catfish are longer lived, reach larger sizes

and generally less fecund and prolific compared to Channel Catfish. Habitat requirement also differ for each species throughout the year as well as preferred food sources. Therefore, because of these differences in life histories between the species, managing the species with separate regulations is recommended to effectively manage the populations for future sustainability.

Catching more large/trophy size Flathead Catfish was rated most important by respondents in a recent angler survey completed on the Mississippi River. The Minnesota and Wisconsin DNRs jointly recommend managing the species with separate regulations for Flathead and Channel Catfish.

9. Do you support the Wisconsin DNR establishing separate bag limits for each catfish species in the St. Croix River from Taylors Falls downstream to Prescott concurrently with Minnesota?

9. Yes ___ No___ No opinion__

Fish Refuge-St. Croix River

The proposed fish refuge on the St. Croix River would designate the area upstream of the State Highway 8 bridge to the St. Croix Falls dam in Polk County as a fish refuge beginning with the normal gamefish season closure in March through June 1st. Fisheries data has documented walleye migrating back downstream post-spawn into mid-May, therefore an end date of June 1st will protect the majority of fish as they migrate back downstream following spawning. This refuge would begin implementation simultaneously with the proposed continuous open season for gamefish. This refuge would apply to all species in order to enhance enforcement of the regulation and protect species including Walleye, Sauger, Northern Pike, Muskellunge and Lake Sturgeon during the critical spawning period for these species. The majority of these species migrate upstream for spawning purposes in the spring and are forced to congregate below the dam. The fish refuge would protect approximately 0.75 miles of river from fishing pressure during the spawn.

10. Do you favor establishing the fish refuge season above the State Highway 8 bridge to the St. Croix Falls dam from March 1 to June 1 in the St. Croix River, Polk County concurrently with Minnesota?

10. Yes ___ No___ No opinion__

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11. Increase the student registration fee for trapper education.

The Wisconsin DNR and Wisconsin Trappers Association have responsibilities in the education of Wisconsin trappers. Trapper education is imperative to educate citizens and trappers about furbearer biology, trapper ethics, trapping techniques, trapper responsibilities, trap handling, regulations and the humane treatment of animals. Trapper education has been mandatory in Wisconsin since May 12, 1992.

Current administrative rules establish a fee for the Wisconsin Cooperative Trapper Education Program (WCTEP). The last time the student registration fee was increased was in 2008. At that time, it was increased from \$8 to \$12.

Student fees are used to prepare and distribute materials used in the WCTEP such as the student manual, course equipment, electronic media, furbearer management publications, trapper education pamphlets, and other related items. Fees are also used to administer the program including instructor reimbursement (venue rental fees, travel costs), insurance coverage and other costs with coordinating the statewide program.

11. Do you support an increase in the student registration fees for trapper education course to cover costs of the program?	11.	Yes, increase the fee \$4 (total course fee of \$16) Yes, increase \$8 (total course fee of \$20) No, I don't support increasing the fee.
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12. Remove the requirement for youth hunters to have a goose permit for the youth season.

During the annual two-day youth waterfowl hunt in September, hunters under the age of 16 are allowed to hunt all species of wild duck, mergansers, geese, coots, and moorhens. During this youth season all license and stamp requirements are waived, except for the state Canada Goose Hunting Permit. Waiving this permit would provide consistency to youth hunters by waiving all applicable state and federal license, stamps and permits for the youth season.

12. Do you support removing the requirement that youth hunters have a state Canada Goose Hunting Permits during the annual youth waterfowl hunt?	12. Yes ___ No ___	No opinion ___
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13. Allow the purchase of multiple turkey harvest authorizations per day when the season is open for hunting.

Current rules only allow turkey hunters to buy a single bonus harvest authorization per day in zones where the number of applicants is less the available quota. The purpose of the rule is so when bonus authorizations first go on sale individuals can't buy up a large amount of leftover authorizations for early seasons before others get a chance to purchase them. However, in many cases when the later hunting periods are open there are still thousands of left-over authorizations still available statewide. Allowing hunters to purchase more than one authorization for a period once the season is open to hunting would allow hunters to potentially cut down on trips to a service center or visits to GoWild during these later seasons and serve as an incentive to purchase some of these additional left over tags.

13. Do you support allowing turkey hunters to purchase more than one bonus authorization per day once the season is open to hunting?	13. Yes ___	No ___	No opinion ___
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14. Allow applicants to keep their preference points if they fail to apply for three years. (Requires legislation)

Various statutory provisions establish that limited draw permit (turkey, bear and others) applicants who fail to apply at least once during any 3 consecutive years shall lose all previously accumulated preference points. This provision may not be as important as it once was as information storage and management technology has improved. Loss of points results in customer dissatisfaction.

14. Do you support legislation that would allow applicants to keep their preference points if they fail to apply for three years?	14. Yes ___	No ___	No opinion ___
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15. Have a single raccoon hunting season starting date. (Requires legislation)

State statute mandates separate opening dates for raccoon hunting. It requires the department open the season for raccoon hunting for residents two weeks earlier than for non-residents. The staggered opening days of the raccoon hunting season for residents and non-residents contribute to season complexity. The DNR is not aware of any significant competition for this resource or overcrowding that would support the continued approach of having separate opening dates.

15. Do you support legislation that would create a single raccoon hunting season starting date for both residents and nonresidents?

15. Yes ___ No ___ No opinion___

16. Remove the prohibition of hunting or trapping certain species by landowners without a permit during the 24-hour period prior to the firearm deer season

Current state law allows the owner or occupant of any land, or a member of their family, to hunt or trap beaver, coyote, fox, raccoon, woodchuck, rabbits and squirrels on their land without a license. However, these individuals are prohibiting from hunting these species 24 hours before the start of the 9-day firearm deer season. This law is likely outdated as various DNR regulations on hunting during that 24-hour period by non-landowners have already been repealed.

16. Do you support removing the prohibition of hunting and trapping certain species by landowners without a permit during the 24- hour period prior to the firearm deer season?

16. Yes ___ No ___ No opinion___