

2022 Spring Hearings Background Information

DNR Fisheries Management advisory questions
Wisconsin Conservation Congress fish-related advisory questions

- In 2022, the Spring Hearings will be entirely online. The online public input questionnaire will open on April 11 at 7 p.m. and will close on April 14 at 7 p.m. The Spring Hearings questionnaire and background information will be posted at dnr.wi.gov, search "[Spring Hearings](#)." Spring Hearings questionnaires will NOT be printed this year.
- The DNR Fisheries Management questions are advisory-only in 2022. Spring Hearings rule questions occur in odd years, since the Legislature does not review administrative rules in even years.
- Following the Spring Hearings, these questions and the public input will be reviewed by the Bureau of Fisheries Management and at the Conservation Congress statewide convention. These questions may advance to the 2023 Spring Hearings as rule proposals.

DNR Advisory Questions

QUESTION 1: Northern Zone muskellunge season structure

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?

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.

QUESTION 2: Walleye statewide bag limit

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.

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.

QUESTION 3: Walleye rehabilitation regulation

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).

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.

QUESTION 4: Data collection on small fishing tournaments

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?

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.

QUESTION 5: Personal bait harvest of minnows on VHS-affected waters

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?

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.

This proposal stems from a series of citizen resolutions and public contacts on opening up the Mississippi River to personal bait harvest of minnows.

If this proposal becomes a rule, live minnows could be harvested from VHS-affected waters, but minnows could not be transported away from these waters, regardless of the source of the minnows. This means that if a person brought minnows purchased from a bait dealer to the VHS-affected water, that angler would have to dispose of any extra minnows onsite and could not transport the minnows away to use later or on another waterbody.

If personal minnow harvest is allowed from VHS-affected waters AND extra minnows purchased from a bait dealer could be transported away from the VHS-affected water, there would not be a way for law enforcement to verify that the minnows in the container from the bait dealer were indeed all minnows from the bait dealer, without minnows from the VHS-affected waterbody mixed in. So, this could lead to minnows from the VHS-affected waterbody being transported to other waters without VHS.

Also, for similar reasons, because some invasive species look very similar to certain minnows, opening up VHS-affected waters (which also contain invasive species like carp) to minnow harvest without also prohibiting transportation of all minnows away from the waterbody could lead to further spread of these invasive species.

QUESTION 6-7: Sturgeon hook and line season opportunities

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.

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?

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.

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

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?

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.

Channel and Flathead Catfish

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?

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.

Fish Refuge-St. Croix River

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?

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.

Wisconsin Conservation Congress Advisory Questions

The following is background information prepared by DNR staff on Wisconsin Conservation Congress-proposed advisory questions relating to fishing.

WARM WATER COMMITTEE

QUESTION 13-14: Panfish/Crappie Limit on the Willow Flowage, Oneida County

Would you support changing the panfish limit on the Willow Flowage to an aggregate bag limit of 10 panfish in total?

Would you support maintaining the daily panfish bag limit of 25 on the Willow Flowage, but no more than 10 of any one species?

The biological survey data for the Willow Flowage is a bit dated but shows that the panfish have a relatively low/moderate abundance and their growth is phenomenal, which may be masking any overharvest. The panfish fishery of the Willow is a quality fishery with angler concerns of potential overharvest, fishing pressure and advances in technology. The Willow Flowage panfish fishery has been performing like this for decades and staff do not have current biological data to justify a regulation change. However, a reduction to a 10-bag would not hurt the fishery.

QUESTION 15. Plum Lake Muskellunge Size Increase

Would you support changing the size limit on Muskellunge in Plum Lake in Vilas County from 40 inches to 50 inches with a daily bag limit of one fish?

DNR staff have been working with the local Muskies Inc. chapter to find appropriate waters for 50" minimums for some time now. Plum Lake has a history of producing large fish and appears to have the forage capacity. This lake is above 1,000 acres and should fit the criteria for a 50" minimum length limit. A muskellunge population estimate survey was conducted in 2017-2018. There were an estimated 71 muskellunge $\geq 30"$ in Plum Lake or 0.07 per acre. A total of 33% of muskellunge caught in fyke nets during this survey were $\geq 40"$, 10% $\geq 45"$ with the largest muskellunge being 50.1 inches.

QUESTION 16: Panfish Limit Change for Lake Dubay

Would you support changing the daily bag limit on panfish in Lake Dubay to 10 per day (all species in aggregate)?

Recent fish and exploitation data from Lake Du Bay (Portage and Marathon counties) along with comparative data from other similar riverine reservoirs evaluating reduced panfish daily bag limits provides support for the proposal of changing the panfish bag limit from a 25- to a 10-fish daily bag in aggregate necessary to improve and maintain a quality panfish fishery in Lake Du Bay.

Lake Du Bay is a 6700-acre riverine impoundment on the Wisconsin River, located within 30 miles of two major population centers in central Wisconsin (Stevens Point and Wausau). Lake Du Bay exhibits a complex fish community with numerous gamefish and non-gamefish species including prominent species such as walleye, muskellunge, channel catfish, common carp, redhorse, black crappie, and yellow perch. Due to its riverine characteristics, environmental factors such as flow regime, dam operations, connectivity, and water quality may be the primary forces of what drives the productivity (recruitment, growth, mortality) of fish populations. Angling and harvest dynamics may still have a considerable influence on the mortality exhibited by fish populations in Lake Du Bay largely based on impoundment size, proximity to Wausau and Stevens Point, public access, high harvest/angling efficiency via electronics/gear, popularity of fishing (number of anglers), and the palatability of fish species such as panfish. Therefore, implementing appropriate harvest regulations on riverine impoundments like Lake Du Bay is of considerable importance when maintaining the abundance and size-structure of fish populations.

Panfish in Lake Du Bay, especially black crappie and yellow perch have exhibited variable abundance and size structure. Historically, black crappie catch rates varies 0.9-9.5 fish/net-night (fair to poor) and yellow perch varies 1.0-1.9 fish/net night (fair to poor). Although the number and strength of year-classes (recruitment dynamics) of black crappie can vary based on environmental factors like flow regime and habitat availability, harvest mortality can ultimately change size structure and abundance of crappie after being shaped by the environment.

Most importantly, there is evidence of significant angler usage and exploitation of the panfish fishery in Lake Du Bay. A black crappie tagging study performed in 2014 found that ~25% of the black crappie population >7" are harvested annually. This exploitation rate may vary annually depending on how angling effort has shifted on the river system and the availability of harvestable-sized fish. Nonetheless, 25% of the black crappie population is considerable exploitation, since black crappie can be a highly abundant species compared to abundances of other sought-after fish species in Wisconsin Impoundments. In addition to exploitation, the amount of fishing pressure on Lake Du Bay is also considerable. For example, at least one catch-and-keep fishing tournament per year on Lake Du Bay exceeds 1000 participants, which reflect a minimum of 6.7 acres per angler fish. Fishing popularity is not a bad thing for Lake Du Bay, it just requires more sustainable fish regulations to accommodate for the high number of anglers using the impoundment.

The implementation of a proposed reduction in the panfish bag limit from a 25- to a 10-fish daily bag limit (all species in aggregate) regulation could potentially help fish population characteristics, and it can definitely improve the quality fishery by creating more equitable harvest across anglers throughout the

year. The implementation of the proposed panfish bag limit reduction would require further evaluation once it is established to assess effectiveness.

QUESTION 17: Harvest Regulation on Panfish for Lake Helen

Would you support changing the daily bag limit on panfish in Lake Helen to 10 per day (all species in aggregate)?

Recent fish data from Lake Helen (Portage County) along with comparative data from other similar small lakes evaluating reduced panfish bag limits provides support for the proposal of changing the panfish bag limit from a 25- to a 10-fish daily bag in aggregate necessary to improve and consistently maintain a quality panfish fishery in Lake Helen.

Lake Helen is a simple-warm-clear lake that is relatively small (76-acre lake), located within 30 miles of two major population centers in central Wisconsin (Stevens Point and Wausau). Lake Helen exhibits a simple fish community primarily driven by productivity of northern pike, largemouth bass and panfish populations. Historically, walleye, panfish, and baitfish have been stocked in the lake, but the perceived successes from these stocking events were either less than desirable or undetected. Regardless of the history of stocking practices in Lake Helen, panfish have shown strong population dynamics in this system. Panfish, particularly bluegill, have the capacity to have moderate abundances (catch rates between 66-226 fish per mile) and exemplary size structure (mean lengths exceeding 3.4", max sizes exceeding 7.2") in Lake Helen, but historically these population metrics have never been successfully maintained. It is likely that harvest regulations and angling dynamics may be strong drivers in the consistency of the panfish fishery in this small lake.

Lake Helen panfish management focuses primarily on harvest regulations and water quality/habitat improvements. Currently, the statewide general regulation (25 fish per day, no size limit) is implemented on Lake Helen. Based on the popularity of fishing in Central Wisconsin, the annual catch-and-harvest tournament held on the lake, the high density of riparian property owners on the lake, and anecdotal reports of higher angler usage, it is assumed that Lake Helen receives considerable fishing pressure. For a small lake, panfish exploitation resulting from a 25-daily bag limit with moderate fishing pressure can result in a panfish fishery where quality varies from year to year. A reduction in the daily bag limit from a 25- to a 10-fish daily bag has been demonstrated in other lakes and reservoirs to maintain quality panfish fishery dynamics over time by changing harvest dynamics amongst anglers.

The Lake District for Lake Helen has recently finished implementing fish sticks to improve fish habitat and the productivity of fish populations in Helen. They are also implementing various aquatic plant management practices, riparian improvements, invasive species management, and other water quality practices. Implementing sound practices that maintain water quality and habitat, in addition to reducing the daily bag limits could improve and/or maintain panfish populations dynamics and the quality of the fishery over time.

The proposed panfish 10-fish daily bag limit (all species in aggregate) regulation, if implemented, should be evaluated over time to evaluate its success.

QUESTION 18: Remove Burbot from the list of Wisconsin Rough Fish

Would you support a legislative change that would remove Burbot from the list of Wisconsin rough fish?

Burbot are statutorily categorized as a rough fish species. We certainly agree with treating these native fish differently from harmful invasive species that are also classified as rough fish. If this native species were listed as a game fish, it could be regulated differently than non-native or detrimental rough fish species and may help reduce wanton waste of harvested burbot. Classifying burbot as a game fish would also allow them to be eligible for Sport Fishing Restoration (SFR) federal funding to help manage populations of this fish. Opening them up to SFR dollars could make it possible to identify and address concerns. On the other hand, funding is already limited, and opening up more species to SFR dollars would mean diverting some funds from existing work to enable attention toward the re-classified species. Other points of consideration include:

- 1) Some burbot are harvested and utilized by commercial fishers under a rough fish contract.
- 2) In Lake Michigan, angling effort can be somewhat high when burbot are found nearshore/in harbors in the winter, but for most of the year burbot are difficult to target and not vulnerable to angling. During those times, angling pressure on burbot is low.
- 3) Population status remains unclear,
- 4) Very little biological data has been collected by DNR [in part due to the lack of eligibility for SFR funding].
- 5) Before a decision could be made on the biological basis of listing burbot as a game fish, we would have to get an approved project with funding for 2 to 5 years to address the issues above.
- 6) If burbot is reclassified as a game fish, the DNR may need to apply burbot-specific regulations to certain waters, such as trout streams.

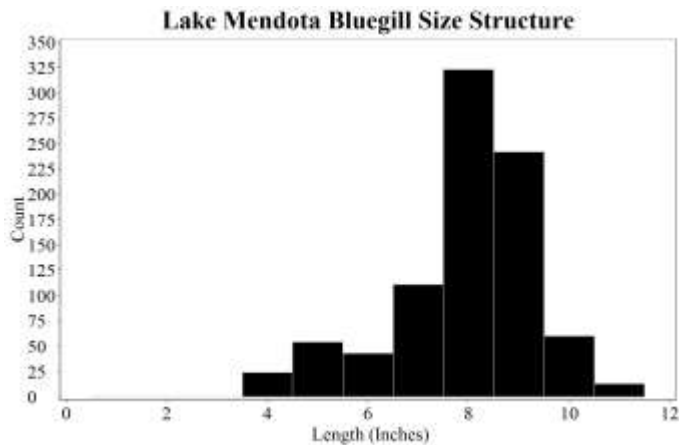
QUESTION 19: Ten Panfish Bag Limit on Lake Mendota in Dane County

Would you support changing the regulation on Lake Mendota to a 10 panfish daily bag limit?

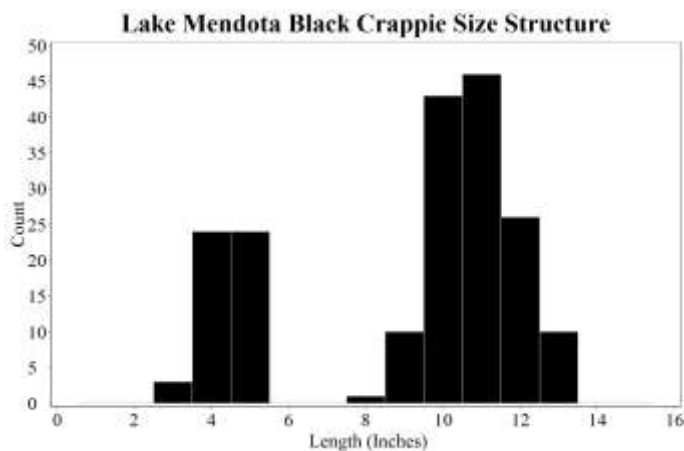
DNR monitors the fishery of Lake Mendota very closely. DNR conducts annual spring electrofishing surveys targeting panfish including black crappie, bluegill, and yellow perch. In-depth Comprehensive Surveys occur on Mendota on a five-year rotation and include spring and fall electrofishing as well as spring fyke netting. Improving the yellow perch fishery is a high priority, so DNR has been conducting annual fall gillnet surveys targeting yellow perch since 2014. Relevant data and conclusions as it relates to the proposed panfish regulation change are summarized below but full text reports including management recommendations detailed in the 2019 Lake Mendota Comprehensive Report are available here: [DNR Lake Mendota Report](#). And the 2014-2019 yellow perch gillnet surveys here: [DNR Perch Report](#)

Based on age estimates, the 2019 surveys showed panfish grow fast in Lake Mendota. For example, it takes a bluegill in Lake Mendota 6-7 years to reach 10" whereas it would take bluegills in other lakes 10 or more years to grow to the same size. A 10" crappie in Mendota is about 4 years old compared to most other lakes taking 5 years+ to reach the same size. Yellow perch in Mendota will grow to 10" in 4 -5 years compared to 6-8 years in most other lakes.

In terms of abundances of panfish, Lake Mendota is below the median catch rate for bluegills compared to other lakes, but this trend does not appear to be influenced by angler harvest. If that were the case, we would expect to see a sharp decline in the size distribution of adult bluegills (e.g. no fish over 8" as anglers remove those sizes and above). However, the size distribution for Lake Mendota bluegill is excellent, with a normal bell-shape centered around 8" with fish exceeding 10", with no indication anglers are having a major impact on their size structure.



The black crappie population shows a similar trend to the bluegills with good growth rates, better than average abundances, and good size structure with age classes ranging from 3-13 years old corresponding to fish ranging from 3" to 13". It is also important to note black crappie populations routinely exhibit variable recruitment (boom-bust) cycles dominated by year-class strength in certain years. As an angler, this dynamic is self-evident with years of excellent fishing followed by years of poor fishing action when targeting crappies.



In contrast with bluegills and black crappies, abundances of yellow perch are low compared to other similar lakes and their abundance is reduced by angler exploitation and predation pressures. The Lake Mendota perch fishery is comprised of mostly young fish ages 0-3, with very few age 4 and older fish in

the system. This trend has persisted for at least the last six years, with few fish surviving past age 4, and is further highlighted with the high total mortality estimate which has averaged 60% for the previous 6 gillnet surveys. Growth-overfishing is apparent at age 4 and larger where fish exceed 11" and few large fish are released by anglers.

Strong predation pressures at young and old life stages are also depressing the yellow perch population. Though anglers appear to have a negative impact on the perch fishery at older ages, abundant predator fish are a strong force in mediating young perch abundance which can regulate year-class strength for years to come. Juvenile perch are a preferred prey item for many predators; as perch recruitment increases many predators switch their feeding behavior to preferentially feed on perch. UW Center for Limnology researchers conducted diet and stable isotope analyses with preliminary results showing young perch are major prey items for walleye in Lake Mendota.

Young perch are also at a disadvantage due to invasive spiny waterfleas which displace native daphnia, an important diet item for developing perch early in life. However, older perch are benefiting from increased spiny waterflea abundance as these prey items are readily available when other preferred diet items are not.

Panfish populations could be improved with increased habitat in the form of overhead cover and spawning habitats. Situated within the heavily urbanized city of Madison, Lake Mendota has a heavily modified shoreline mostly comprised of private manicured shorelines with rip rap or break walls with mowed lawns with few downed trees or wood in the water and elevated levels of nutrient loading and resuspension.

This proposed regulation is likely to improve perch abundances and size structure since perch are experiencing high adult mortality in addition to low recruitment. The proposed regulation is likely preemptive or protecting potential future overharvest of bluegills and crappies since there is no evidence of angler over-harvest impacting size structure or growth rates for either species. With the recent PFAS consumption guidance covering the lower Yahara Lakes from Lake Monona to the Rock River confluence ([PFAS Advisories](#)), this regulation may help alleviate future harvest in Mendota as anglers change their behavior to avoid the PFAS consumption advisory. For example, we might expect to see an increase in angling pressure and harvest in Mendota as anglers who once harvested fish from Waubesa move to Mendota to avoid the PFAS consumption advisory.

In 2016, a 25 fish daily bag limit for panfish with a 10 fish maximum of yellow perch was proposed internally within DNR as a way to offer some harvest pressure relief for yellow perch without greatly impacting the current fishing experience for bluegills and crappies. The statewide panfish experimental regulation study is ongoing and is scheduled to be completed by 2026 and will likely include additional regulation options.

QUESTION 20: New panfish harvest regulation from 25 bag limit to 10 bag limit on Lake Jacqueline

Would you support changing the panfish bag limit on Lake Jacqueline (Glisezinski Lake) from 25 daily aggregate to 10 panfish aggregate?

Background information and fish data from Lake Jacqueline (aka, Glisezinski Lake), along with comparative data from other similar small lakes that have evaluated reduced panfish bag limits provides

support for the proposal of reducing the panfish bag limit from a 25- to a 10-fish daily bag in aggregate which may be necessary to consistently achieve a quality panfish fishery in Lake Jacqueline.

The current panfish regulation for Lake Jacqueline is the statewide general regulation (25 fish per day, no size limit). Lake Jacqueline is a small 40-acre lake located within 30 miles of two major population centers, Stevens Point and Wausau. With the popularity of fishing in Central Wisconsin and anecdotal reports of higher lake visitations by anglers, it is assumed that Lake Jacqueline receives considerable fishing pressure. For a small lake, moderate fishing pressure combined with high panfish exploitation resulting from a 25-fish daily bag limit can ultimately result in a panfish fishery that has variable quality year to year.

Lake Jacqueline recently went through an unanticipated partial winterkill determined in the Spring of 2020. The Lake District is actively engaged in aquatic plant management (APM) and winter aeration to reduce the potential for winterkills and to improve water quality. With the current APM and aeration regime, partial winterkills have become rare for Lake Jacqueline. Winterkills can transform panfish populations by increasing growth and size structure, but never do these events consistently maintain panfish size structure, especially if high bag limits are still implemented in small 40-acre lake.

A post-winterkill rapid fyke net assessment was performed in fall of 2020. Based on catch rates of bluegill, yellow perch, black crappie and detections of various other fish species, it was determined that the severity of the winterkill was not significant, and stocking was not required to restore populations. Although several stakeholders suggested that panfish stocking should still occur, stocking panfish may be highly detrimental to the already existing populations that are actively recovering, which could lead to year-suppression and growth impacts. As an alternative to stocking, a reduced panfish bag limit can be implemented which may present a much more viable solution to consistently maintain panfish population abundance in a small lake like Lake Jacqueline. We think the proposed panfish 10-fish daily bag limit (all species in aggregate) regulation can be implemented, as long as this harvest regulation is evaluated over time to determine its success.

QUESTION 21: Little Green Lake panfish limit from 25 to 10 per day

Would you support reducing the panfish limit on Little Green Lake from 25 to 10 panfish?

Little Green Lake is a very heavily fished body of water, and data may support the 10 panfish bag limit. Evaluation of experimental panfish regulations is in progress now, which may provide other regulation options in the future.

QUESTION 22: Lake Wissota Walleye Slot Limit

To help protect the spawning sized walleye population of Lake Wissota, would you support a 3 bag daily limit with a 14-16" harvest limit, protected slot of 16-24" and one over 24" allowed as part of the daily bag?

Local fisheries staff are evaluating the merits of the two spring hearing resolutions submitted for Lake Wissota. Staff are looking at historic fisheries survey data, creel census surveys and population modeling to determine if the existing regulation is most appropriate or other potential regulations might work better to enhance the walleye fishery on Lake Wissota.