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Subject: **Opportunity to add select lakes to 15/5 experimental panfish regulation as part of the Adaptive Management Panfish Project**

Wisconsin Conservation Congress and Citizen Resolution Authors:

After soliciting public input as part of the Adaptive Management Panfish Project (AMPP), the Department developed an experimental regulation package to increase panfish size on 94 selected lakes where harvest appeared to be a problem. The regulation package was supported at the 2015 spring hearings and went into effect in 2016. The Panfish Team has reached the adaptive phase of the study, and would like to announce the opportunity to add lakes into the study with the following regulation: a total of 15 panfish but only 5 of any one species (15/5).

Based on initial analyses of biological and social science data collected between 2018 and 2021, this regulation has shown the most promise to increase size structure in panfish populations that experience high angling pressure, exhibit small size structure and moderate to fast growth. Social science evaluations suggest WI panfish anglers are open to more restrictive regulations to promote increased size structure. At this point the biological data clearly indicates improvement of size structure under the 15/5. Please see the attached data summary for more details.

Not all lakes are appropriate for the 15/5 regulation. Lower panfish bag limits like this are only necessary and will only achieve benefits if there is high angler harvest that cuts off panfish growth potential. To ensure only appropriate lakes are added to this regulation, the Department must have adequate size structure and growth data on Bluegill or Black Crappie showing poor panfish size but moderate-to-fast growth. Lakes that are not eligible for this experimental regulation may still be considered for the aggregate 10-bag. If you have a lake you'd like considered for the 15/5 regulation, please work with your local Fisheries Biologist to consider writing a Citizen Resolution for the 2022 WCC Spring Hearings. Citizen resolutions from the 2022 WCC Spring Hearings may be fast tracked directly to a rule proposal if the local biologist deems the waterbody appropriate for inclusion in the study.

General questions can be directed to Alex Latzka (Fisheries Systems Biologist, Panfish Team Leader, and DNR Fisheries Management Representative on the WCC Warmwater Committee) at Alexander.Latzka@wisconsin.gov, or 608-438-4275. Questions about specific lakes should be directed to your local Fisheries Biologist: https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Fishing/people/fisheriesbiologists.html.

Summary of Midterm Evaluation of Adaptive Management Project for Panfish Experimental Regulations
DNR Panfish Team – January, 2022

Background
In 2016, a 10-year experiment was started to improve panfish size structures using restrictive regulations on 94 lakes where harvest appeared to be a problem. The objective was to determine if a regulation would improve the mean length of Bluegill and Black Crappie populations by 0.5 to 1 inch, and be socially acceptable. Lakes were given one of three regulations: (1) A total of 25 panfish but no more than 10 of any one species (25/10); (2) A total of 15 panfish but no more than 5 of any one species during May and June (seasonal 15/5) - 25 panfish in total the rest of the year; (3) A total of 15 panfish but no more than 5 of any one species (15/5).

The DNR Panfish Team recently began a midterm evaluation to assess initial responses and plan the remainder of the experiment. Panfish size responses were evaluated using standardized panfish surveys via netting and electrofishing during the spring before and 3+ years after the regulations were implemented. Bluegills over 3" and Crappies over 5" were measured in these surveys. Stakeholder perceptions, opinions, and experiences were evaluated using three social science techniques (discussions with local anglers via focus groups at 6 lakes, windshield cards distributed at boat landings at 38 lakes, and a statewide survey administered via US mail and online). Changes in angler effort were also assessed at a subset of lakes using car counters in 2015 and 2021.

The 15/5 regulation is the only experimental regulation currently meeting the project objective, and thus was determined to be the only regulation eligible for new lakes during the 2nd half of the experiment (2022-2026). This document summarizes our findings to date, but additional analyses and detailed reports of these results are in preparation and will be shared when available.

Fish Length Responses
Through our evaluations of panfish populations in experimental and reference lakes, we measured over 17,000 Bluegill in 96 lakes and 11,000 Black Crappie in 40 lakes, respectively. Bluegill mean length increased in 15/5 lakes, but not in 25/10 or seasonal 15/5 (repeated measures ANOVA; $p<.001$). The mean length increase was over 1". Similarly, Black Crappie mean length increased in 15/5 lakes only ($p<.001$), with a mean increase of over 2". Thus, to date, for both Bluegill and Black Crappie, the 15/5 regulation is the only one to meet the AMPP goal of improving mean length by 0.5-1". Compared to the 10-bag aggregate panfish bag limit which on average produces modest responses in mean length (3/4" for Bluegill) and is thus suitable for quality size panfish in some systems, these initial results indicate that the 15/5 may produce a stronger response and thus be more suitable when more substantial harvest reductions are required or in unique cases where trophy panfish objectives are appropriate.

Public Opinions
Our social science evaluations revealed general support for and belief in restrictive regulations. We found the following indications of support:

- A plurality of statewide survey respondents:
  - Preferred restrictive regulations over the standard 25-bag limit
  - Are open to having different regulations based on lake-specific needs
- The majority of windshield survey respondents at restricted lakes supported their restrictive regulation.
- Focus group participants generally wanted to keep their regulation or shift to a more restrictive regulation.

In addition, the evaluations provide evidence that the 15/5 regulation is likely to be accepted:

- In focus groups, participants from 15/5 lakes generally wanted to keep their regulation in place, while participants from less restricted lakes were more likely to want to shift to the 15/5.
- Of the windshield survey respondents from the 15/5 lakes

    - The majority supported or strongly supported the regulation
    - Perceived size quality of Crappie was higher than at 25/10 lakes
- Counts of vehicles and anglers visiting a subset of our study lakes before and after the regulations went into effect showed unchanged angler effort at 15/5 lakes, but decreased effort at 25/10 and seasonal 15/5 lakes.

Evaluations highlighted potential benefits of a year-round restrictive regulation over a seasonal restriction:

- Focus group participants at the seasonal 15/5 lakes reflected a desire to implement the regulation year-round in order to reduce harvest during the ice-fishing season.
- Statewide survey results show us that anglers were marginally more likely to harvest panfish when ice-fishing, and marginally less likely to harvest panfish during spawning period.

Conclusion: Given that anglers are generally receptive to restrictive regulations and that biological data indicates the 15/5 is most effective in achieving desired panfish size structures, we find strong evidence supporting the decision to allow lakes to shift to the 15/5 regulation at this time.