Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

2025 Mississippi River Commercial Fishing Report

Waterbody Code: 721000

Photo Credit: Sniadajewski

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Introduction

The Mississippi River supports the only commercial fishery in Wisconsin outside of the Great Lakes. The species harvested and gear types utilized are unique to the Mississippi River and are significantly different than the Great Lakes fisheries. Commercially harvested native species include buffalo (smallmouth and bigmouth), catfish (channel and flathead), bullheads, freshwater drum, bowfin, shovelnose sturgeon, redhorse, carpsuckers and gar. Non-native and invasive species like common carp, grass carp, silver carp and bighead carp are also harvested. Grass carp, silver carp and bighead carp must be eviscerated upon capture. Fish roe markets also persist for shovelnose sturgeon and bowfin.

Commercial fishermen in Wisconsin-Minnesota boundary waters are permitted to use gill nets, seine nets and setlines. Commercial fishermen in Wisconsin-Iowa boundary waters are permitted to use gill nets, seine nets, trammel nets, bait nets, buffalo nets, frame nets, slat traps and setlines. Commercial fishermen intending to harvest shovelnose sturgeon in both boundary waters are required to possess a sturgeon harvest permit. Individuals who hold a Mississippi River commercial fishing license are required to submit monthly reports whether they are fishing for their own use or are selling their catch.

Wisconsin shares approximately 230 miles of the Mississippi River with Minnesota and Iowa covering over 180,000 acres. Wisconsin-Minnesota boundary waters consist of Pools 3 through 8 and Wisconsin-Iowa boundary waters are Pools 9 through 12. The actual state line for Wisconsin-Minnesota extends 5.2 miles into Pool 9, and the Wisconsin-Iowa state line extends 2.3 miles into Pool 12 (Figure 1). Lake Pepin runs from river mile 785.4 to 764.9 and is defined as Pool 4A.

Mississippi River commercial fishing statistics are compiled annually from monthly catch reports submitted by the commercial fishermen. Monthly reports contain the date, pool fished, amount of gear used, pounds of each species taken and other pertinent information about the commercial fisherman's operation. Data is used to assess the long and short-term trends of the fishery and to ensure regulation compliance.

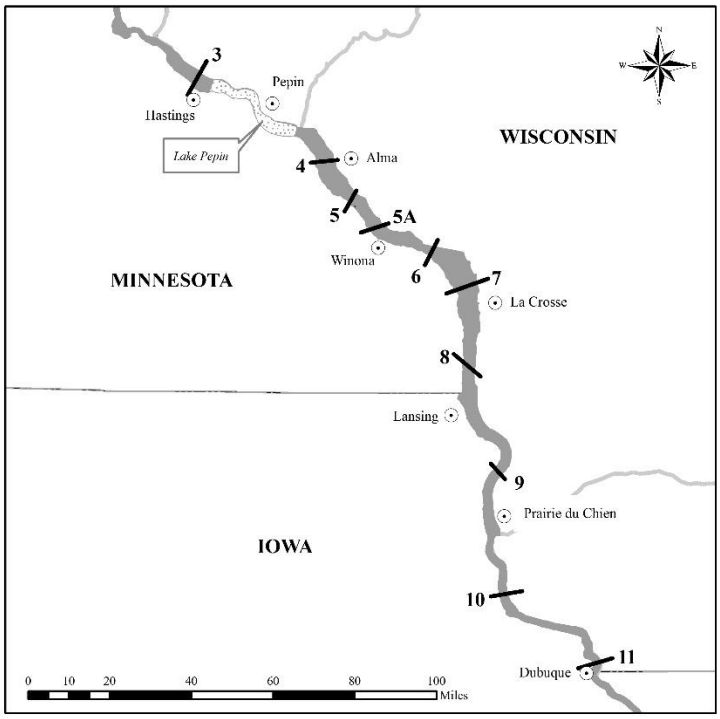

Figure 1. Lock and Dam locations on the Mississippi River, Wisconsin.

Commercial Harvest and License Summary

Wisconsin commercial fishermen reported harvesting 334,863 pounds of fish in calendar year 2025. This is the lowest amount harvested in the 73-year history of harvest reporting on the Mississippi River in Wisconsin (Figure 2). Total harvest decreased 45% from 2024 (514,848 pounds) and was only 48% of the 10-year average harvest of 692,576 pounds. Total harvest has decreased since 1970 and reflects the number of commercial fishermen participating in the fishery. At the peak of harvest in the 1960s and early 1970s, 4-6 million pounds of fish were harvested annually by over one thousand fishermen. In license year 2025 (April 2025 to March 2026) only 74 fishermen purchased licenses and of those only 36 reported harvesting any fish. Individual commercial fishermen can hold multiple licenses for different gear types. In 2025 15 bait net, 10 buffalo net, 3 frame net, 17 gill net, 3 trammel net, 9 seine, 47 setline and 6 sturgeon harvest licenses were issued.

At the time of this report (April 2026) the overall reporting rate of fishermen in license year 2025 was 77.3% (69.9% for setline licenses and 82.2% for all other Mississippi River licenses). Fishermen are required to report even if they did not fish. This

number will likely improve as March reports continue to be received and follow up with law enforcement is completed. Reporting rates from 2024 and 2023 were 93.8% and 96.9% respectively. Reporting rate was calculated by dividing the total number of monthly reports received by the total number of monthly reports that should have been received.

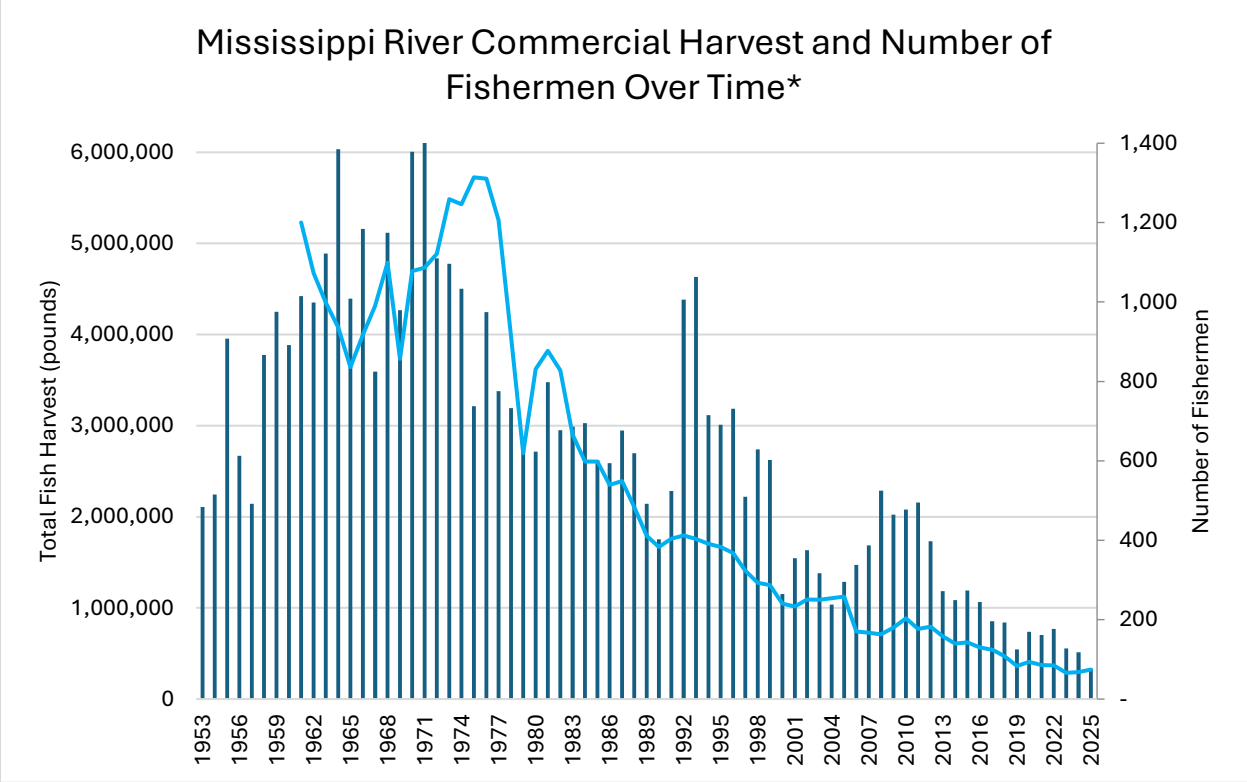

Figure 2. Total annual commercial harvest (bars) and number of fishermen (line) over time in Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River. *Historical counts of the number of fishermen were not reported before 1961.

In 2025 the top ten fishermen contributed 96.5% of the total harvest reported. These top fishermen are the few remaining that make a living by commercially fishing and this percentage shows the significant extent to which they contribute to overall harvest. Individual fishermen harvest data required to calculate this value has only been reported since 2017. From 2017 to 2025 the percent contribution of the top 10 fishermen has steadily increased from 83% to 96% conveying a decline in the number of “career” commercial fishermen.

Commercial Harvest by Species

Smallmouth buffalo comprised the largest proportion (43%) of overall harvest by species with 144,525 pounds harvested (Figure 3). Common carp comprised 25% of total harvest (82,686 pounds), channel catfish 20% (67,717 pounds), flathead catfish 5% (15,956 pounds), freshwater drum 3% (10,827 pounds), bowfin 2% (6,858 pounds) and bigmouth buffalo 1% (2,164 pounds) of total harvest. All other species combined comprised only 1% (4,130 pounds) of total harvest. Compared to 2024, harvest of smallmouth buffalo, bigmouth buffalo, common carp and flathead catfish decreased, harvest of channel catfish and freshwater drum remained the same and harvest of bowfin and shovelnose sturgeon increased.

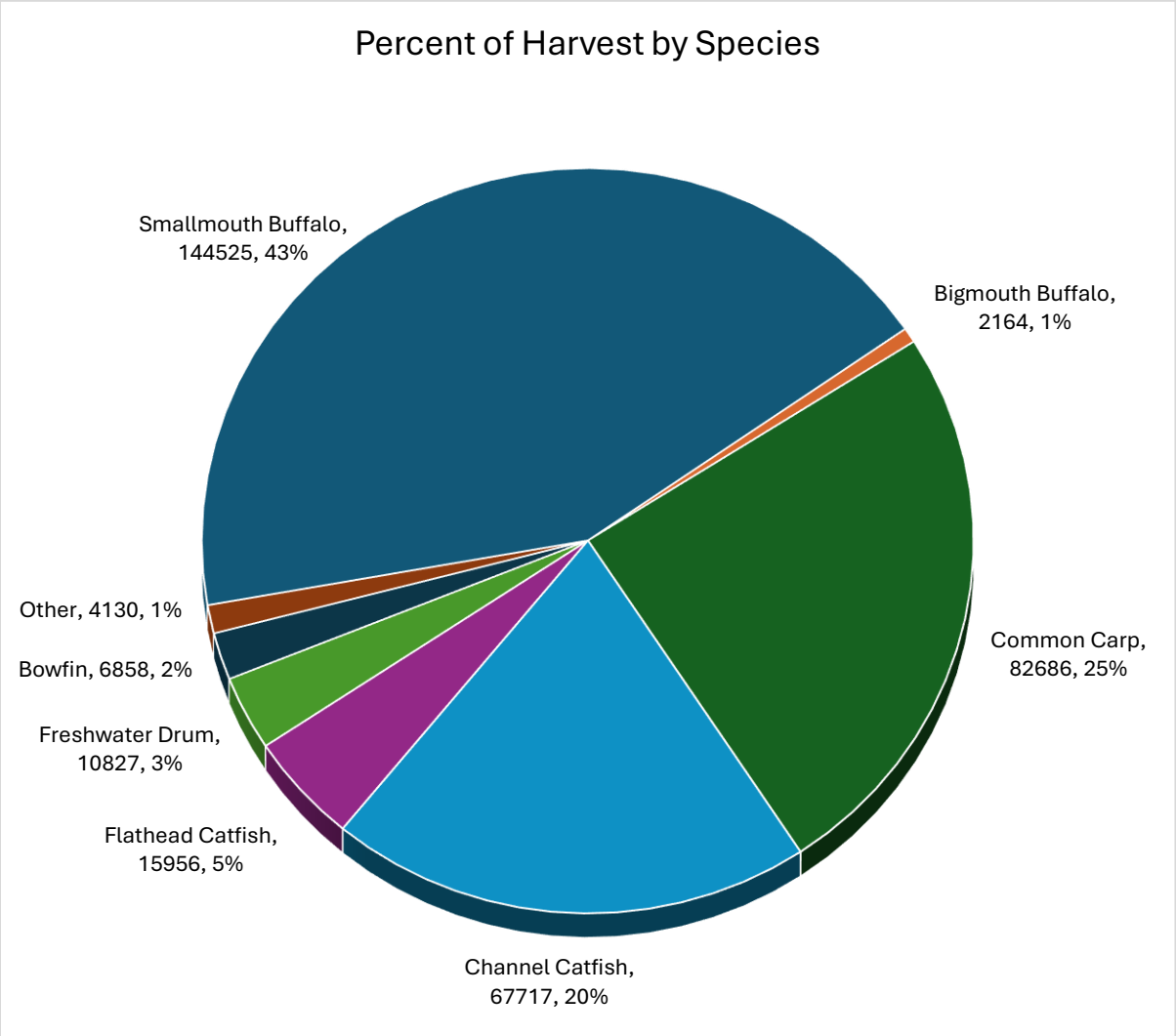

Figure 3. Percent of total harvest by species from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025 (species, pounds harvested, percent of harvest).

Commercial Harvest by Pool

In 2025, 79% of the total commercial fish harvest came from Wisconsin-Iowa boundary waters (Figure 4). The largest harvest (98,436 pounds) occurred in Pool 9 followed closely by Pool 10 (89,707 pounds) and Pool 11 (74,944 pounds). The largest harvest in Wisconsin-Minnesota boundary waters occurred in Pool 8 (39,206 pounds) followed by Pool 7 (20,050 pounds) and Pool 5 (8,805 pounds). Minimal to no harvest occurred in Pools 3, 4, 4A, 5A and 6. The most common carp, channel catfish and shovelnose sturgeon were harvested in Pool 9 (Table 1). Pool 10 produced the most bigmouth buffalo, flathead catfish, freshwater drum, bowfin and redhorse and Pool 11 produced the most smallmouth buffalo. In 2016, harvest rates between Wisconsin-Minnesota and Wisconsin-Iowa boundary waters were similar: Minnesota 53% vs Iowa 47%. Harvest rates in 2025 (Minnesota 21% vs Iowa 79%) show a disproportionate decline in commercial harvest in Wisconsin-Minnesota boundary waters.

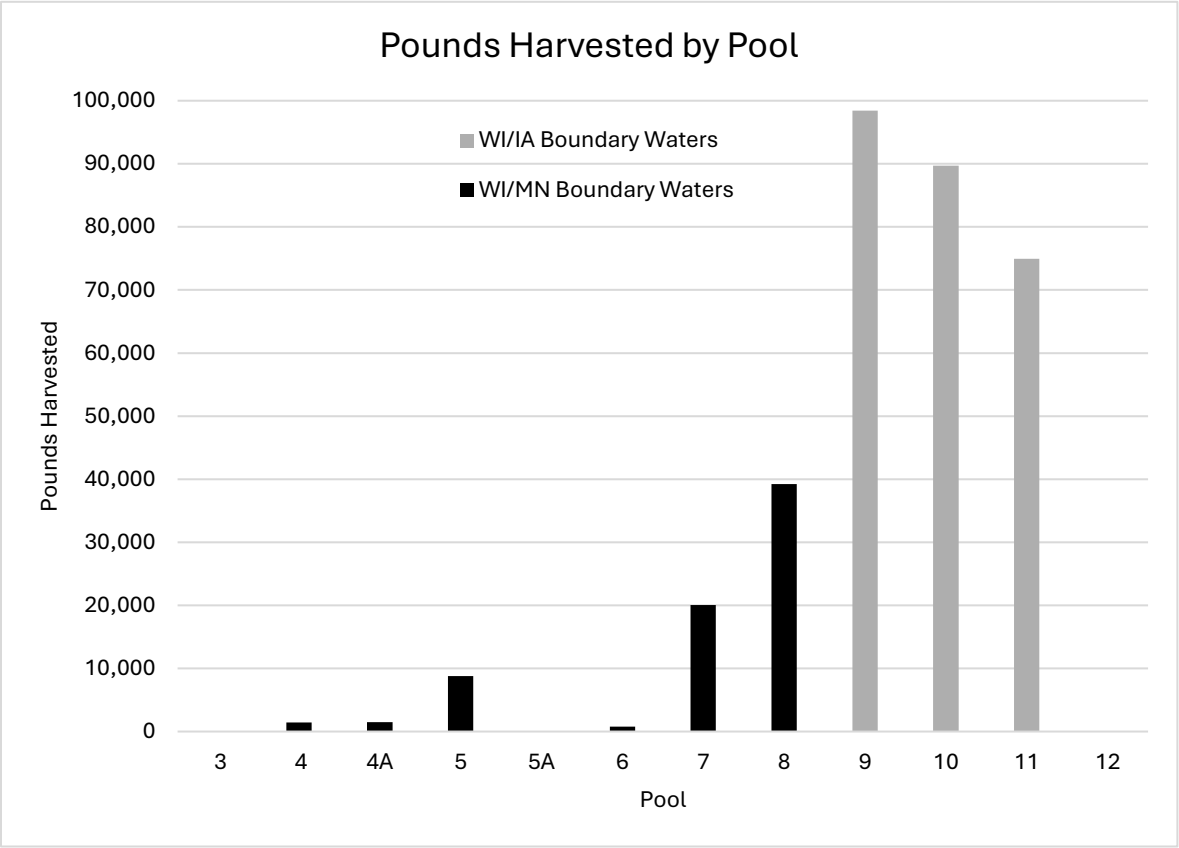

Figure 4. Pounds of fish harvested by pool from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025.

Commercial Harvest by Gear Type

Gill nets accounted for the majority (72%) of harvest in 2025 (Figure 5). Bait nets comprised 14% of total harvest, setlines 10%, frame nets 2%, buffalo nets 1%, trammel nets 1% and seines <1%. The majority of common carp, smallmouth buffalo, bigmouth buffalo, freshwater drum and shovelnose sturgeon were harvested by gill net (Table 2). Bait nets caught the most flathead catfish, channel catfish and redhorse. Setlines contributed a significant proportion of channel catfish harvest (44%) and frame nets accounted for all bowfin harvest. The most notable change in gear type usage in 2025 compared to previous years is the lack of fish harvested by seine. Only three seine hauls by two commercial fishermen totaling 4,200 feet were done in 2025, the lowest value on record. Historically, a large proportion of total harvest has come from seining, in 2016 seining accounted for 52% of the total harvest and gill nets only 30%. Seining is one of the most equipment and labor-intensive commercial gear types often requiring a crew of 4-5 people. As the number of "career" commercial fishermen has dwindled the use of seines has diminished dramatically.

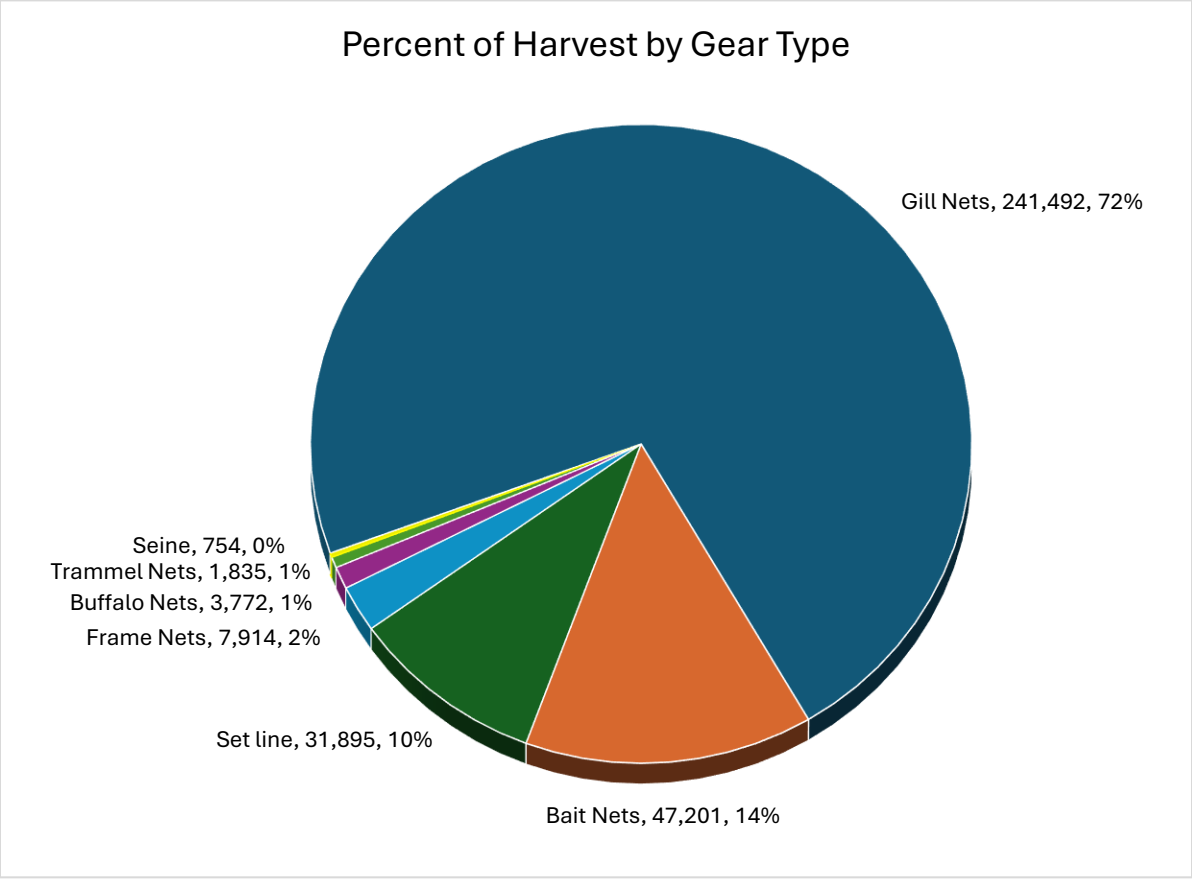

Figure 5. Percent of total harvest by gear type from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025 (gear type, pounds harvested, percent of harvest).

Commercial Harvest by Month

The largest commercial harvest in 2025 (87,322 pounds) took place in the month of March with almost twice as much harvest as April (45,222 pounds) and three times the harvest of any other month (Figure 6). This high harvest in March and April is largely market driven and corresponds to the time of year multiple religions favor eating fish over other forms of meat. Harvest from May through November was consistent between 20,000 and 30,000 pounds. Very little harvest occurred in February and December, limited predominately by weather and ice conditions and a small amount of harvest (14,847 pounds) occurred in January.

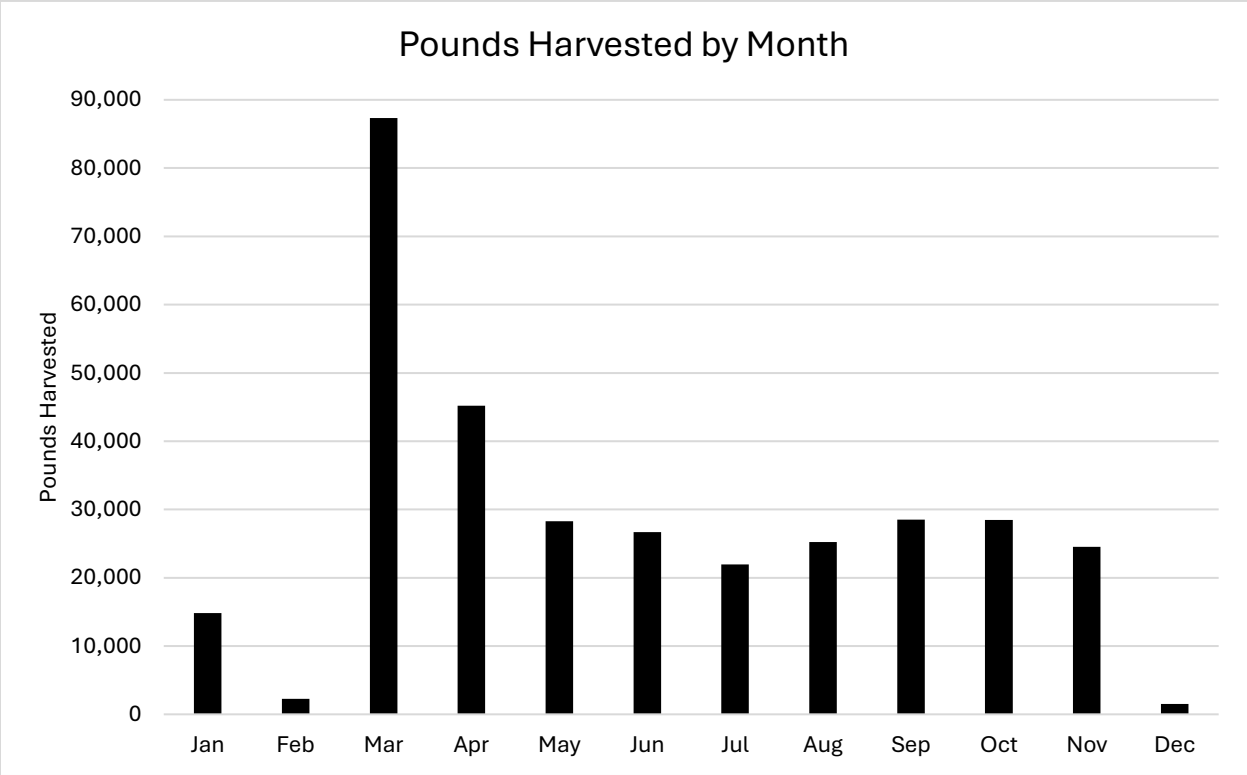

Figure 6. Pounds of fish harvested by month from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025.

March saw the largest harvest of common carp, smallmouth buffalo and bigmouth buffalo, April a near equal number of smallmouth buffalo and the most freshwater drum, May the most channel catfish and shovelnose sturgeon, June the most flathead catfish and November almost all bowfin (Table 3).

Species composition of harvest varied throughout the year based on market demands and species availability and susceptibility to capture (Figure 7). Common carp and smallmouth buffalo comprised most of harvest in December, January, February, March

and April. Smallmouth buffalo continued to comprise a large proportion of overall harvest throughout the summer and fall but common carp did not. Catfish began to contribute to harvest in April and remain as a large proportion (30-50%) of harvest through October with some harvest continuing through November. Catfish, especially flatheads, exhibit unique overwintering behavior where they seek out, and congregate in, specific overwintering habitat hunkering down in an almost dormant state until temperatures rise in spring. This behavior reduces their susceptibility to capture and special regulations prevent overfishing of overwintering congregations. Catfish harvest is limited to 100 pounds a day from seines from October 1st through April 30th. Freshwater drum contributed a small amount to harvest beginning in April and continuing through October. Almost all bowfin harvest occurred in November and shovelnose sturgeon harvest occurred primarily before and during spawning from March through May.

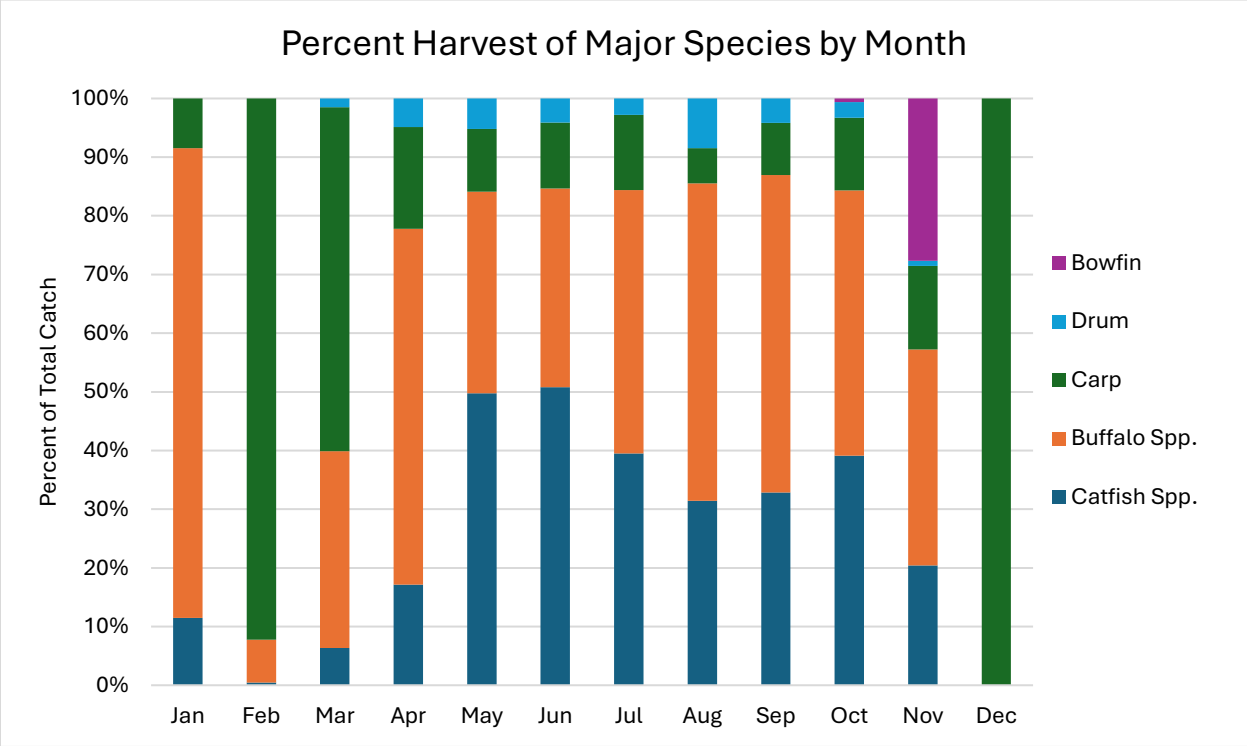

Figure 7. Percent harvest of major species by month from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025.

Commercial Harvest by Buyer

Unlike recreational licenses, commercial fishing licenses permit the fishermen to sell their harvest to specially licensed wholesale fish dealers, restaurants, taverns, meat markets, hotels or in private sales to the final consumer (Figure 8). Commercial

fishermen can also keep their harvest for personal use. A buyer is required to have a wholesale fish dealer license if they are not the final consumer and intend to sell the fish purchased from a commercial fishermen to others. Most sales (93%) in 2025 were to wholesale fish dealers. Restaurants, taverns, meat markets and hotels are exempt from needing a wholesale fish dealer license and are combined under “wholesale exempt”. Sales to wholesale exempt businesses accounted for 2% of harvest. Private sales to the final consumer and fish kept for personal use each comprised 2% of harvest. Sales to pay ponds in other states made up the remaining 1% of reported harvest.

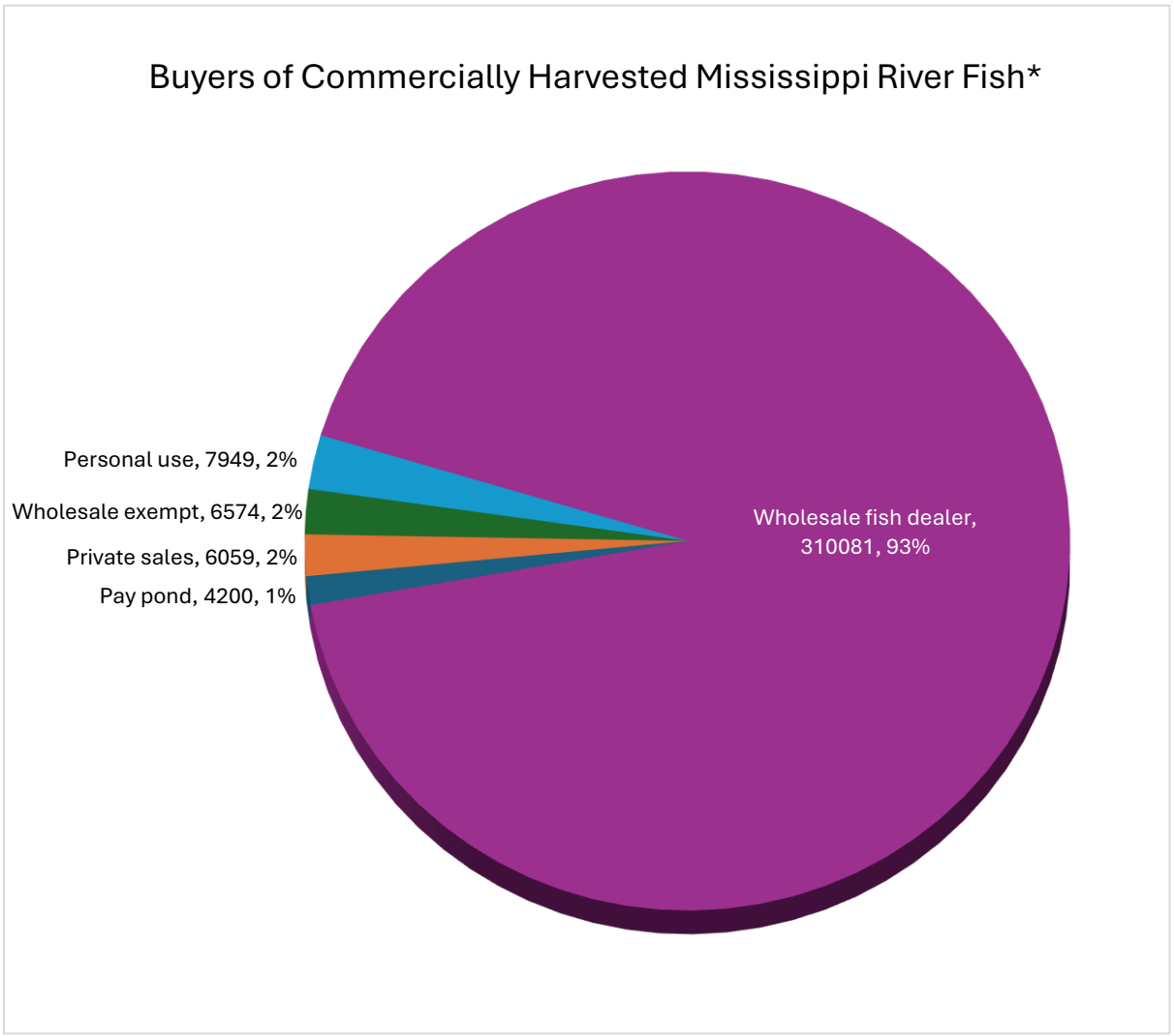

Figure 8. Buyers of commercially harvested fish from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River in 2025 (fish destination, pounds of fish, percent of catch). *Wholesale exempt businesses include restaurants, taverns, meat markets and hotels.

Roe Harvest

Two Mississippi River species, shovelnose sturgeon and bowfin, support markets for roe harvest. In 2025, 1,392 pounds of shovelnose sturgeon producing 216 pounds of roe (Figure 9) and 6,858 pounds of bowfin producing 517 pounds of roe (Figure 10) were harvested from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River. Roe sales have the potential to be much more lucrative than sales of fish flesh. Compared to the 25-60 cents per pound fetched by fish flesh, shovelnose sturgeon roe sells for $40-60 per pound and bowfin roe for $15-20 per pound. Shovelnose sturgeon roe harvest has been tracked separately from flesh harvest since 2001. Bowfin roe harvest has only been tracked separately than flesh harvest since 2017. In 2025, shovelnose sturgeon flesh harvest was 45% of the 25-year average harvest of 3,085 pounds and roe harvest was 86% of the 25-year average harvest of 253 pounds. Shovelnose flesh and roe harvest over time has been highly variable with numerous peaks of high harvest separated by multiple years of moderate or low harvest. This variability is likely market driven and could correspond to years in which roe prices were high. Harvest in 2025 was low compared to years of high harvest (5,000-7,000 pounds). The proportion of roe to flesh harvest was calculated annually for shovelnose sturgeon by dividing total roe harvest by total flesh harvest (Figure 11). Since the early 2000s, this proportion has increased from 3% to 16% suggesting that targeted roe harvest has increased and harvest solely for flesh has decreased. A single commercial fisherman was responsible for 89% of shovelnose flesh harvest and 91.5% of shovelnose roe harvest in 2025.

Bowfin roe harvest in 2025 (517 pounds) was the highest reported since roe began being tracked separately in 2017, however total flesh harvest (6,858 pounds) was just below the long-term average of 7,241 pounds. Bowfin flesh and roe harvest is also highly variable over time, suggesting market influence. A single commercial fisherman was responsible for all bowfin harvest in 2025.

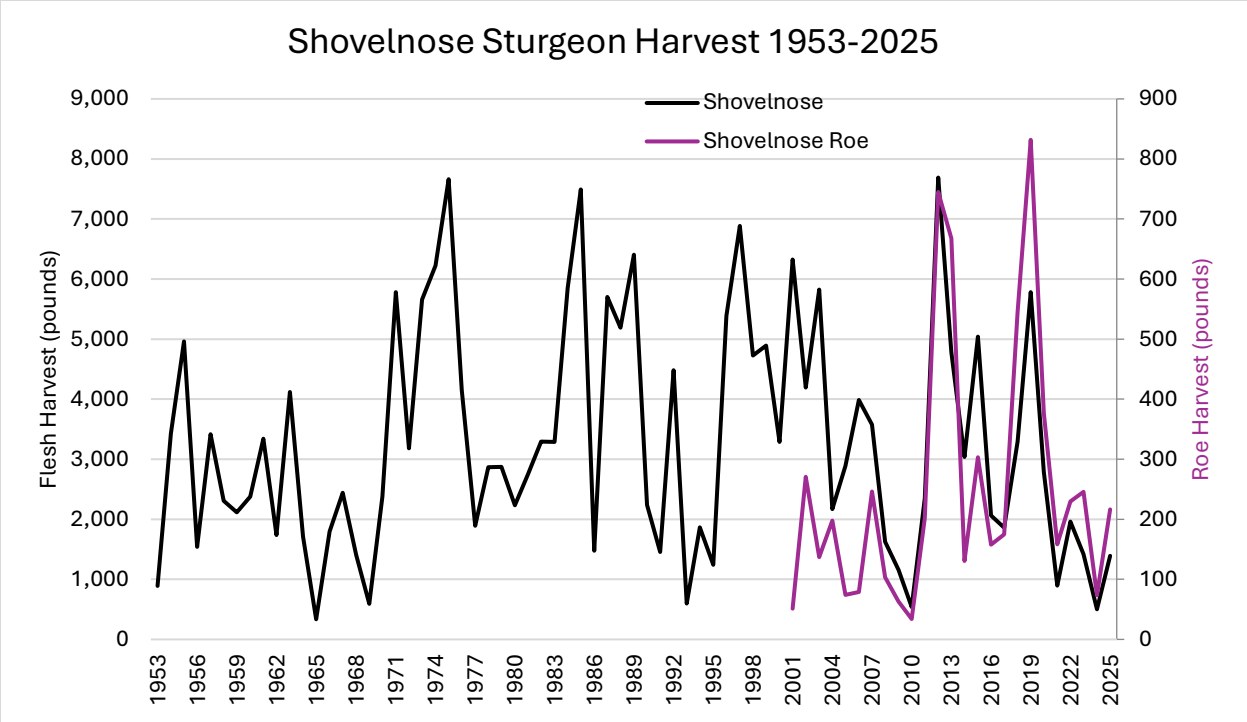

Figure 9. Shovelnose sturgeon flesh and roe harvest from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River from 1953-2025. Roe began being reported separately in 2001.

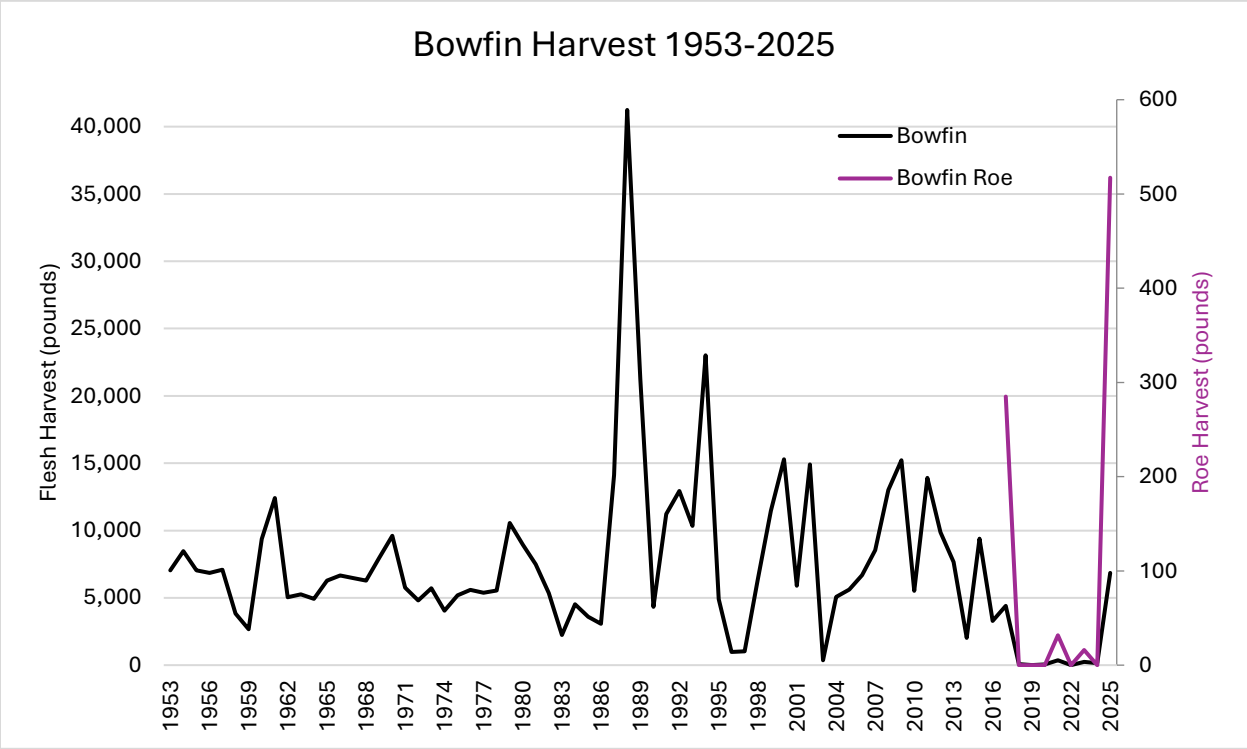

Figure 10. Bowfin flesh and roe harvest from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River from 1953-2025. Roe began being reported separately in 2017.

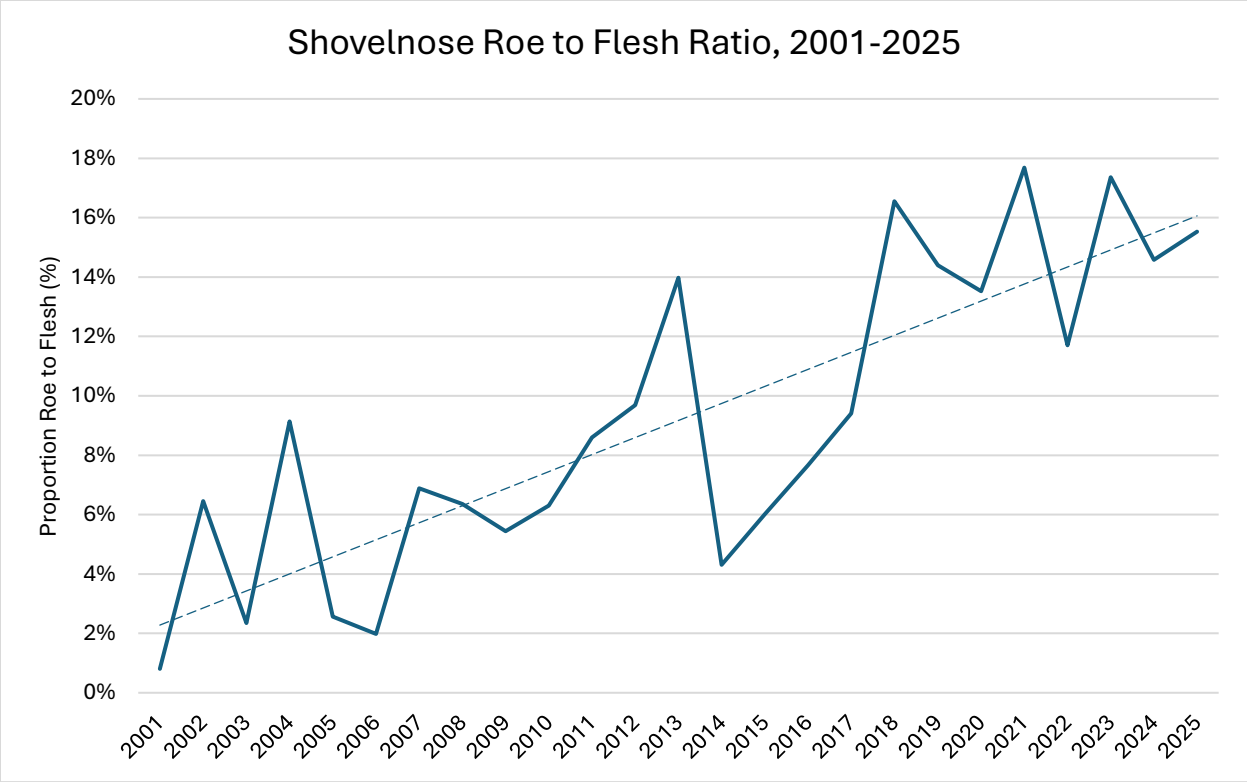

Figure 11. Annual shovelnose roe to flesh harvest ratio from Wisconsin waters of the Mississippi River from 2001-2025.

Table 1. 2025 Mississippi River commercial fish harvest in pounds by pool and species. Values in red correspond to the highest harvest for each species. Values in orange are the second highest harvest.

Species	3	4	4A	5	5A	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total Harvest
Common Carp	0	1,000	1,500	3,000	0	600	9,900	21,540	34,173	7,181	3,792	0	82,686
Smallmouth Buffalo	0	0	0	5,500	0	0	5,110	3,377	25,408	46,919	58,211	0	144,525
Bigmouth Buffalo	0	0	0	300	0	154	500	120	0	1,080	10	0	2,164
Channel Catfish	0	372	0	5	0	0	4,249	11,571	37,110	9,805	4,605	0	67,717
Flathead Catfish	0	87	0	0	0	0	276	1,775	271	8,715	4,832	0	15,956
Bullheads	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	22	236	282	0	0	542
Freshwater Drum (Sheepshead)	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	570	529	6,968	2,745	0	10,827
Shovelnose Sturgeon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	75	532	514	271	0	1,392
Shovelnose Sturgeon Roe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	95	87	35	0	216
Bowfin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6,858	0	0	6,858
Bowfin Roe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	517	0	0	517
Redhorse & Suckers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	177	1,103	68	0	1,348
Carpsuckers & Quillback	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	286	0	301
Gar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	267	124	0	391
Silver Carp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	0	0	0	0	25
Grass Carp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	131	0	0	0	0	131
Softshell Turtles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	170	0	1	0	0	171
Pool Fish Total (roe & turtles excluded)	0	1,461	1,500	8,805	0	754	20,050	39,206	98,436	89,707	74,944	0	334,863

Table 2. 2025 Mississippi River commercial fish harvest in pounds by gear and species. Bottom two rows are gear unit totals. Values in red correspond to the highest harvest for each species. Values in orange are the second highest harvest.

Species	Bait Net	Buffalo Net	Frame Net	Gill Net	Seine	Setline	Trammel Net	Total Harvest
Common Carp	156	0	101	81,829	600	0	0	82,686
Smallmouth Buffalo	765	872	0	142,006	0	182	700	144,525
Bigmouth Buffalo	130	0	10	1,870	154	0	0	2,164
Channel Catfish	34,277	869	43	2,450	0	29,669	409	67,717
Flathead Catfish	9,108	2,031	460	2,655	0	1,658	44	15,956
Bullheads	236	0	274	0	0	32	0	542
Freshwater Drum (Sheepshead)	1,199	0	69	9,042	0	279	238	10,827
Shovelnose Sturgeon	0	0	0	1,097	0	75	220	1,392
Shovelnose Sturgeon Roe	6	0	0	182	0	0	28	216
Bowfin	0	0	6,858	0	0	0	0	6,858
Bowfin Roe	0	0	517	0	0	0	0	517
Redhorse & Suckers	1,300	0	15	33	0	0	0	1,348
Carpsuckers & Quillback	0	0	0	301	0	0	0	301
Gar	30	0	84	53	0	0	224	391
Silver Carp	0	0	0	25	0	0	0	25
Grass Carp	0	0	0	131	0	0	0	131
Softshell Turtles	0	0	0	46	0	125	0	171
Total Fish Harvest (excluding roe & turtles)	47,201	3,772	7,914	241,492	754	31,895	1,835	334,863
Total Gear Units of Effort	Nets (n)	Nets (n)	Nets (n)	Lineal Feet	Lineal Feet	Hooks	Lineal Feet	
	4,251	165	202	616,650	4,200	63,589	2,200	

Table 2. 2025 Mississippi River commercial fish harvest in pounds by month and species. Values in red correspond to the highest harvest for each species.

Species	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Harvest
Common Carp	1,257	2,025	50,562	7,697	2,936	2,975	2,798	1,496	2,526	3,474	3,440	1,500	82,686
Smallmouth Buffalo	11,731	160	27,065	27,004	9,432	9,003	9,763	13,423	15,340	12,700	8,904	0	144,525
Bigmouth Buffalo	154	0	1,850	0	0	10	20	130	0	0	0	0	2,164
Channel Catfish	1,705	10	5,361	7,464	12,064	9,873	7,118	5,962	7,471	7,627	3,062	0	67,717
Flathead Catfish	0	0	110	159	1,591	3,618	1,506	1,913	1,846	3,345	1,868	0	15,956
Bullheads	0	0	51	103	73	3	0	0	0	64	248	0	542
Freshwater Drum (Sheepshead)	0	0	1,258	2,178	1,425	1,094	610	2,126	1,180	745	211	0	10,827
Shovelnose Sturgeon	0	0	336	379	498	0	0	0	2	177	0	0	1,392
Shovelnose Sturgeon Roe	0	0	43	68	90	6	0	0	0	10	0	0	216
Bowfin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	170	6,688	0	6,858
Bowfin Roe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	504	0	517
Redhorse & Suckers	0	0	166	183	201	45	160	167	161	152	113	0	1,348
Carpsuckers & Quillback	0	0	301	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	301
Gar	0	0	262	0	30	84	0	15	0	0	0	0	391
Silver Carp	0	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
Grass Carp	0	48	0	55	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	131
Softshell Turtles	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	105	65	0	0	0	171
Total Fish Harvest (excluding roe & turtles)	14,847	2,268	87,322	45,222	28,278	26,705	21,975	25,232	28,526	28,454	24,534	1,500	334,863