

Northern Inland Lakes Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee



Meeting Minutes



Location: Tuscarora Township Hall, Indian River, MI

Date: Friday, October 18, 2024

Roll call

Attendees (public)

- Frank Krist, chair
- Jim Burke, BLPA
- Dave Steenstra, BLPA
- Steve Buerkel, BLPA
- John Hutto, BLPA
- Gina Burke, BLPA
- Brenda Archambo, Sturgeon for Tomorrow
- Jay Woiderski, Sturgeon for Tomorrow
- Tom Ludwig, Long Lake Improvement Association
- Paul Borg, Grand Lake Sportsmans Club,
- Ron Dulak, BLA
- Roger Bergstedt, BLA
- Roger Selvig, BLA
- Irv Dedow, BLA
- Wayne Blomberg, PCLA
- Ron Kardosh, PCLA
- Theresa Krist, HBAAA
- Steve Roznowski, Long Lake Improvement Assoc.
- John Gannon, MAPS
- Mark Jarvie, TU
- Mike Vignau, DU
- Jeff Powers
- Dale Wolford
- Bryon Lanphear, Headwaters Trout Unlimited
- Rick Fowler, Outdoor Writer
- David Kolar, Orchard Beach Mullett Lake
- Richard Libich

Staff present

- John Walters, DNR Natural Resources Commission
- Tim Cwalinski, MDNR
- Neal Godby, MDNR
- Emily Martin, MDNR
- Doug Schultz, MDNR
- Pat Van Daele, MDNR
- Tyler Bruning, USGS Hammond Bay
- Bill Parsons, LTBB

- Dylan Jones, LTBB
- Marcella Domka, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

Meeting minutes

Opening Comments:

Frank Krist introduced John Walters (NRC Commissioner) and Doug Schultz (MDNR Lake Huron Basin Coordinator). Doug is relatively new in his position, and this was his first time attending a NILCFAC meeting.

Fall Juvenile walleye electrofishing assessments for Burt, Mullett, Black, Grand, and Long lakes (DNR/LTBB):

- Neal Godby provided an overview of why fall walleye surveys are conducted and methods used by MDNR and tribal natural resources departments. The intent of these surveys is to assess walleye recruitment and survival of stocked fish and is viewed as an index. There is generally variation in catch rates and size of fish from year to year and that is expected.
- Surveys are conducted at night using electrofishing boats and crews survey either the entire shoreline or sections of the shoreline of inland lakes.
- Overall, there were strong year classes in all Inland Waterway lakes sampled
 - **Black Lake:** In 2021 and 2023 when stocking occurred, the catch of Age-0 walleye was 13.1 and 6.5 fish/hour, respectively. This year (2024) was a very good year for natural reproduction (8.9 fish/hour). Since Black Lake was not stocked in 2024, these are wild fish. The catch rate in 2024, a non-stocked year, was similar to most recent years when stocking occurred. Catch rates remain relatively low compared to other regional years, which has been the case historically as well.
 - **Mullett Lake:** Age-0 Walleye catch rate was great (83 Age-0 walleye/hour) which is the highest catch rate since 2014 (just under 80 Age-0 Walleye/hour). Based on the continued presence of wild year classes in Mullett Lake, walleye stocking is not warranted here.
 - **Burt Lake:** Age-0 Walleye catch rate was 180 Age-0 Walleye/hour which is much higher than any previous catch rate in the surveys conducted most years annually from 2010-2024. Burt Lake has consistently produced wild year classes of walleye but the average has been increasing in the last 5-10 years.
 - **Grand Lake:** No Age-0 Walleye were caught in 2023 survey, but nearly 40 Age-0 fish per hour were captured this year. This is a good example of why consistency in surveying lakes is important – there is variability from year to year.
- Emily Martin (MDNR – Tribal Coordination Unit) and Dylan Jones (LTBB) agreed that in many systems Age-0 Walleye catch rates were up but there was some variability as expected. In particular, Emily noted that systems with previously documented natural reproduction seemed to have very good year classes.

- The 2023-2024 winter could have played a big role in the large Walleye year class this year as successful Walleye reproduction can be dependent on multiple weather/climate factors. Spring warming rates could have also contributed to better egg/fry survival. However, this can be variable depending on the system.
- The Age-0 Walleye caught in fall surveys this year would be expected to reach legal size in the next 3 to 5 years but this is also dependent on the system since fish growth varies between lakes.

Sturgeon Survey Review for Black Lake, Mullett Lake, and Burt Lake (Tim Cwalinski, Emily Martin, Dylan Jones)

Black Lake (2023)

Tim Cwalinski gave a presentation prepared by Ed Baker about the 2023 Black Lake sturgeon survey. The 2023 Black Lake survey was intended to target sub-adult fish using 6-inch and 8-inch mesh gill nets to replicate the methods from the 2013 survey. Nets were set in 10-30 ft of water to avoid areas with low oxygen and major temperature differences between netting area and the surface.

- During the survey, 350 individual lake sturgeon were captured and 9 fish were recaptured. There were 3 mortalities during the survey, which lasted 3 weeks, on days when catch rates were unusually high and processing time was long as a result.
 - Population estimate for sub-adult lake sturgeon was 3,489 sturgeon (roughly 20-43 inch long fish)
- Many lake sturgeon handled during the survey did not have PIT tags and were believed to be wild fish, which would mean natural reproduction was much higher than previously believed. However, genetics revealed that many un-tagged fish were stocked fish and that there is PIT tag loss occurring after stocking. MDNR and MSU are working with Oden State Fish Hatchery to assess tag loss in sturgeon by holding some fish for a longer period and documenting tag loss.
- Some successful natural reproduction is occurring in Black Lake which may be because the population is at a point where sturgeon eggs and fry can overcome predator populations or other obstacles that prevented successful natural reproduction previously.
- There are ongoing discussions between MDNR and tribal partners on next steps related to the Black Lake sturgeon management plan such as stocking, harvest rates, and a timeline for addressing goals. These discussions began in August with the tribes initiating internal discussions later in the year.

Mullett Lake (2024):

Emily Martin reviewed the results of the Mullett Lake survey. Five crews participated in the three-week survey including two Michigan DNR crews, one joint crew with MDNR and MSU,

one crew from LTBB, and one crew from Bay Mills Indian Community. The major difference from the Black Lake survey was the use of 6, 8, and 10-inch mesh since the goal was to assess both adult and sub-adult lake sturgeon.

- A total of 42 fish from 30 to 71 inches were handled during the survey. There were no lake sturgeon mortalities.
- No population estimate for lake sturgeon could be calculated because not enough lake sturgeon were recaptured during the survey (only 2 recaps, need 3). A requirement of mark and recapture studies is to mark enough fish to have a sufficient recapture rate that allows for a population estimate. This was not the case.
- Mullett Lake is a low-density population and MDNR does not intend to conduct another lake sturgeon survey until 2034 at this time.

Burt Lake (Planned summer 2025)

Dylan Jones (LTBB) reviewed the plans for the 2025 Burt Lake sturgeon survey. LTBB is leading the survey and there are four crews committed (Two from MDNR, one each from LTBB and BMIC). This survey will be conducted in a similar manner to the Black and Mullett Lake surveys, using gill nets with 6, 8, and 10-inch mesh.

- The survey in 2022 was cut short so the goal to be able to generate an estimate was not accomplished.
- Water profile will be done the week prior to the survey to assess where thermocline is – want to avoid sampling where oxygen is low or temperature differences between net and surface are too high.
- Safety notices at launches and tackle shops will be put out to make sure the public are aware. BLPA offered to send an email to inform the public.
- Fish safety is taken seriously in these surveys – handling time is minimized, tanks are aerated, or water is circulated, most measurements are taken in the water.
- BLPA suggested coordinating with marine sheriff to help minimize issues with boats and nets.
- Natural Resources Commissioner John Walters indicated that the NRC would not consider a sturgeon harvest in Burt and/or Mullett lakes until there are data showing an adequate population.

Cheboygan River boardwalk and fishing platforms (Marcella Domka, Tip of the Mitt)

Marcella Domka reviewed the status of the Cheboygan River boardwalk and fishing platforms project (Project partners including Tip of the Mitt, MDNR, EGLE, Army Corps of Engineers, City of Cheboygan). This project was intended to address issues with limited,

safe access on the river as well as address habitat degradation due to eroding paths near the river.

- Currently there are two 30 ft x 8 ft timber fishing piers with six more planned to cover 800 linear ft. The piers have a 90 ft casting range, solar lighting, and are connected to the boardwalk and paths to downtown Cheboygan. The remaining piers are planned for 2026 using funding secured by the city.

Smallmouth Bass and Goby discussion (David Steenstra, Jim Burke)

Burt Lake & Gobies presentation (Neal Godby)

Neal Godby gave a brief presentation to give some history on the topic and provided a brief overview of what we know about Smallmouth Bass and gobies in Burt Lake.

- Gobies have been present in Burt Lake since at least 2010 and research indicates that round gobies can impact individual bass nests, but there is no demonstrated evidence they can impact a bass population in a lake or negatively impact bass recruitment to adult size.
 - Gobies found to improve bass growth and it's possible that this benefit helps offset impacts of egg predation since larger fish produce more eggs.
- MDNR conducted a Status & Trends survey in Burt Lake in 2015 but cannot survey the bass population annually. These surveys require a substantial time commitment of 2 crews for 2 weeks.
 - In 2015, there were 13 year classes of smallmouth bass present which indicates a healthy population
 - There are many lakes that are on a rotation for full fish community surveys so it is not feasible to survey them annually or even every 2-3 years.
- Bass regulations: Harvest opener is Saturday before Memorial Day with Catch and Immediate Release (CIR) allowed year-round statewide since 2015. CIR has also been allowed from last Saturday in April – Friday before Memorial Day since 2006.
- Bass tournaments: Burt Lake ranks 190th for the total number of bass tournaments per year (4 tournaments in 2023 for Burt and Mullett Lakes).
- Other factors outside round goby can influence the fish community, including disease, weather/climate, and other invasive species.
- Neal encouraged the group to communicate with bass fishing organizations and tournament organizers about concerns and what tournament anglers are seeing.

Discussion and BLPA concerns (Dave Steenstra, Jim Burke)

- Dave shared a video prior to the meeting for attendees to view that explains the concerns from BLPA about the impact of round goby on smallmouth bass in Burt Lake, particularly when angling occurs during nesting. Fewer nests have been observed in recent years and

gobies have been observed consuming entire nests when bass are pulled off nests by anglers.

- BLPA would like to see the bass season move to open the third Saturday in June, which aligns with Lake St. Clair. Also, would like CIR season to move with the opener to prevent the catch of bass off nests. They have not spoken to other bass groups outside of Bass Nation, who was not interested in involvement.
- Tim Cwalinski noted that populations can be cyclic – MDNR doesn't have data to confirm or deny there has been a change in this population, but regulation changes are not an easy process.
 - The implementation of CIR statewide was the result of working with bass groups for a decade, so changing it back without biological support is unlikely to be successful. This can't be a local change.
- MDNR staff stressed the importance of talking to bass groups and getting their input on status of the populations. If those groups echo BLPA concerns, an alliance with those organizations will help an effort for a regulation change.
 - In Minnesota, bass have been documented to nest deeper than historically observed due to other changes in systems over time.
 - There are many steps between bass hatching and becoming part of the adult population and there are many trade-offs and feedback loops along the way, some of which could be related to goby, but others could be related to weather/climate/food availability and other variables.
- BLPA has reached out to various universities for a graduate student to conduct an in-depth bass study in Burt Lake, but so far have not had interest.
- MDNR staff noted that to assess the impact of gobies on bass at a population level there would need to be population estimates and detailed data on bass which requires a lot of effort.
- BLPA will continue to talk to fishing groups, other lake associations, and other DNR committees about their concerns.

Round Table

- Long Lake (Alpena)
 - Good bluegill catches, still complaints about northern pike population from walleye fisherman. Walleye caught are decent – one 28.5-inch fish reported. Seeing fewer young smallmouth bass.
 - Cormorants down this year.
 - Long Lake Park improvements – can launch 4 boats at a time and everything is paved. Long Lake Association put bumpers on the docks, improved landscaping, and donated \$5,000 toward park improvements.
- Frank Krist noted that during almost every discussion today more survey work was desirable. Frank then suggested that Doug Schultz should discuss Fisheries Division's efforts to increase revenue significantly.

- Fiscally, Fisheries Division is in rough shape. When the license package was restructured in the past, Fisheries got less revenue from licenses. Staffing has been reduced quite a bit in more recent years. Number of licenses sold has been stable, within the top 5 in the US for license sales but fee structure is poor.
 - Randy Claramunt has been working on a proposal to have a phased approach – initially a base increase with no change to the license structure, then a CPI (consumer price index) increase each year, then some add-ons may come back, and so on. Fisheries is funded by license sales, but we aren't the only division receiving those funds. There are other divisions with tight budgets or projected shortfalls in the next several years.
 - #1 goal is to get more staff in the field if we get a fee increase.
- Groups are welcome to voice support for a fee increase – send a letter to Director Scott Bowen and cc Randy Claramunt.
- Encouraged Dave & Jim to continue talking with Tim, Neal, and Seth Herbst about the bass issue to ensure if a bass study happens it is well designed.
- Crooked-Pickerel Lake
 - A lot of bluegill, and rock bass are the primary fishing opportunity. Some northern pike and regulation change a couple years ago has been well received. Yellow perch have declined. Observing lack of crayfish
 - Observed cormorants and mergansers around ice out.
- Black Lake
 - Committee started to investigate adding fish shelters in lake.
 - Slow walleye fishing for some but others have done well.
 - Yellow Perch have been slow so far
 - Still doing temp/DO profiles, debating getting Hach kits for phosphorus, etc to do those analyses. Are those still considered acceptable or reliable?
 - Lab is ideal, but that's an expense. Any additional data is helpful, and it doesn't need to go to a professional lab every time.
 - Did drone survey of lake this year, Frank Krist will send link to the group once he receives it.
 - Have problem with too few green belts present on the lake based on survey
- Grand Lake
 - Ice was mediocre, cancelled the Winter Fish Derby. Had summer derby, lake warmed up fast (ice out by March 18th)
 - Noticed patches of algae on lakeshore last week, which usually isn't observed
 - A lot of perch, smaller perch in the summer but in winter see 13-14" perch.
 - More reports of walleye being caught than last summer
- Mullett Lake
 - Using small EGLE grant for educational signage installed about cleaning boats. Have 5 public boat launches and have national program signs plus signs specific to Mullett Lake which show existing invasives and species to watch out for.
 - Most concerned about Aloha State Park because canal is full of Eurasian watermilfoil

- Pilot study this winter with Tip of the Mitt to look at chloride concentrations in snow melt, it was not a good year but two stations with a high chloride load were identified.
- Good year of walleye fishing, mainly smaller perch
- Burt Lake
 - Indian River is getting sewers, which is great for Mullett and Burt Lake. This will be ongoing for a few years.
 - BLPA Board wants to get other lake organizations communicating with one another. Idea is to get all board members from other organizations involved in each other's boards, so everyone is in contact. Everyone has agreed so far.
 - A year or two ago, had 300+ sturgeon sightings in the lake and in Sturgeon River. Could we organize some way to share these sightings in a way that is useful?
- USGS in collaboration with USFWS
 - Released sterile male lamprey into the Cheboygan system during 2024. A workshop scheduled with partners in December will determine if sterile male release will continue through 2029.
 - Maple River treated with lampricide for first time since 2006. No new treatments on schedule in immediate future.
 - Wrapped up electrofishing survey on Pigeon, Maple, and Sturgeon rivers and are gearing up for out-migrating lamprey surveys.
- Headwaters TU
 - Have done end of year surveys and temp loggers, in addition to caging cedars to help reduce impact of deer
- Sturgeon for Tomorrow
 - Shivaree will coincide with the sturgeon season on Black Lake as usual