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DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
LANSING



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For decades, Fisheries Division has recognized that there is significant congestion with the number of commercial fishing licenses and commercial fishing gear authorized in Saginaw Bay. The fisheries resources of Saginaw Bay are not capable of supporting the current level of commercial fishing effort or the potential for licensed gear deployment and allow commercial fishers to be economically viable. As a result, the number of active fishing operations can negatively impact the ability of any one license to operate in an economical and profitable manner on a consistent basis.

By now some of you may have heard of the Departments recent action to provide a permit to licensed commercial fisher Mr. Dana Serafin for exploration of new whitefish grounds near Harbor Beach Michigan. While this action may cause concern or lead to questions, I would like to explain the rationale behind this permit and the Departments goals.

The deployment and presence of commercial fishers and their gear in Saginaw Bay has long been a source of contention within the Saginaw Bay sport fishing community, whether right or wrong. Animosity towards commercial nets by recreational anglers has increased in the last decade as yellow perch numbers have declined significantly and the open water walleye fishery has expanded in popularity. As a result, members of the Lake Huron Citizen Fisheries Advisory Committee representing angling interest in Lake Huron that provides feedback to the Division on sport fishery concerns, routinely inquire how the Department can reduce the commercial fishing foot print in Saginaw Bay in order to alleviate conflict with recreational fishers. Due to statutory requirement for the Director to renew commercial fishing licenses from one year to the next, the Department's options to address the situation are limited to either buying out existing Saginaw Bay commercial fishing licenses, which at this time is prohibitively expensive, or moving current commercial fishers to another area of the Great Lakes that is undercapitalized.

This winter, in our first attempt to reduce effort in the bay, the Fisheries Division recommended selecting a current licensed fisher in Saginaw Bay and exploring the establishment of a new whitefish fishery in southern Lake Huron.

Harbor Beach, located south of Grindstone City and north of Port Sanilac on Lake Huron, is an area that Fisheries Division believes could be successfully developed specifically for a whitefish fishery. Harbor Beach is a port within the southernmost Lake Whitefish Management Unit in Lake Huron (http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/laketrout_huron102213_439224_7.pdf), a whitefish Management Unit that has not been commercially fished in Michigan since 1985. Our neighbors in Ontario currently license commercial fishing effort for whitefish on the Canadian side of WFH-08. Given the extent and success of Canadian fishery, Fisheries Division believes there is likely an abundant stock of Lake Whitefish in Michigan waters available for harvest. Additionally, after discussions with the Lake Huron Citizen's Advisory Committee, the Division believes that a licensed fisher could viably operate out of Harbor Beach on grounds south of Harbor Beach and North of Port Sanilac with minimal recreational conflict.

This potential new fishery will be assessed under a 3-year Research Permit. During this time, Mr. Serafin will retain some ability to continue fishing in Saginaw Bay until the fishing potential near Harbor Beach is explored and understood. If successful, during the second and third permit years, significant gear reductions in Saginaw Bay would be required by Mr. Serafin. Within 3 years, a decision will be made about establishing a permanent fishing license at Harbor Beach in exchange for permanently relinquishing all current licenses and gear from Saginaw Bay.

Objectives for this research fishery and potential license include:

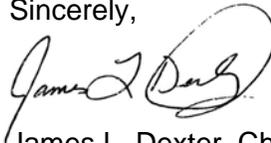
- Remove the greatest amount of state commercial fishing licenses and associated fishing gear from inner Saginaw Bay with an emphasis on small mesh trap nets.
- Reduce the annual commercial yellow perch harvest from inner Saginaw Bay.
- Evaluate the current lake whitefish population and stock health in Southern Lake Huron.
- Commercially harvest lake whitefish over 17 inches total length without taking protected game fish species and minimizing the catch of whitefish under 17 inches in length.
- Evaluate and develop acceptable commercial fishing grounds which are compatible with other Southern Lake Huron uses and values.
- Evaluate the timely collection and public posting of trap net locations by the DNR as a means to avoid accidental interaction with commercial fishing gear by other lake user groups.
- Evaluate the potential long term sustainability and profitability of a state-licensed large mesh commercial trap net fishery for Lake Whitefish in Southern Lake Huron.

Since the Department's main reason for developing a Harbor Beach fishery is license removal and gear reduction in Saginaw Bay, the new fishing opportunity was presented to the individual license holder that was capable and willing to retire/relinquish the greatest amount of licenses and gear from the bay. Mr. Serafin is in a clear position to relinquish more licenses and more fishing gear than any other person currently licensed.

Mr. Serafin is the largest fulltime fisher actively engaged in commercial fishing in Michigan. In Saginaw Bay, he annually harvests more than twice as many pounds of fish than any other commercial fisher and close to 50% of the high dollar inner bay species. In recent years his inner bay operation has also been responsible for over 50% of the commercial yellow perch harvest. Successfully switching Mr. Serafin's effort from yellow perch to whitefish would be a benefit to all Lake Huron fishers.

This potential move would not only have the greatest impact towards reducing licenses and gear, but would also result in reduced recreational conflict. Exploratory fishing will begin at Harbor Beach in June and is expected to continue over the next three seasons in order to assess whitefish stocks and potential profitability. If you have any questions please feel free to contact either myself or commercial fish administrator Mr. Tom Goniea at 517-284-5825.

Sincerely,



James L. Dexter, Chief
Fisheries Division
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