From Travis Hartman

2023 Lake Erie Committee
Total Allowable Catch Decisions Announced

The annual Lake Erie Committee (LEC) meeting was held in Hamilton, Ontario on March 29 and 30. The meeting resulted in the announcement of this year's Total Allowable Catch (TAC) values, which represents safe harvest levels as agreed to by consensus of the five member LEC.

For walleye:

- Ohio (51.11%), Ontario (42.06%), and Michigan (5.83%) share the TAC, based on the proportion of "walleye habitat" in each jurisdiction as determined by the LEC's Walleye Task Group (WTG).

- Pennsylvania and New York both contribute walleye harvest and survey data to the annual modeling process but are considered outside of the TAC area.

First and foremost, I will cut to the chase and mention that this year's TACs will not require any change to your Ohio daily limits.

The walleye daily limit will remain at 6 fish with a 15" minimum size limit, and the yellow perch limits will not change from last year:

- 30 in the west zone from Toledo to Huron,
- 10 in the central zone from Huron to Fairport, and
- 30 in the east zone from Fairport to Conneaut

The WTG population model predicted 94 million fish for the 2023 fishing season, with a large 2021 hatch entering the fishery at 2 years old.

Despite the increase in numbers, the predicted biomass of the population slightly declined, mostly due to a decrease in average fish size related to the number of young fish in the population.

- Last year the walleye TAC (14.5 million fish, Ohio's share was 7.4 million fish) was the highest ever set during the quota management era that began in 1977.

This year with the decrease in biomass, the TAC was set at 13.5 million fish (Ohio's share is 6.9 million fish), a 6.9% decrease compared to 2022, but still the second highest TAC ever set.

Keep in mind that for both walleye and yellow perch, we have formal management plans that have harvest policies that are applied to the population model.

While the LEC (Lake Erie Committee) has the flexibility to set the TAC within a Recommended Allowable Harvest (RAH) range, the preference is to follow the policy and use the mean RAH value.

The walleye TAC of 13.5 million fish represents this year's mean RAH and is within the 20% change constraint (basically we agree to set each year's TAC within 20% of the previous year's TAC unless exceptional circumstances require a deviation from the 20% change constraint).

2023 yellow perch TACs are as follows:

- 2.4 million pounds in the west zone (Ohio's share is 1.2 million pounds),

- 0.5 million pounds in the central zone (Ohio's share is 259 thousand pounds),

and

- 3.1 million pounds in the east zone (Ohio's share is 1.0 million pounds).

While we could spend hours discussing perch, the short story is that the west zone population is well above the 20-year average and is experiencing decent hatches with the 2021 hatch being the largest surveyed since the 2003 hatch. The central zone population is well below the 20 year average and has not had an average hatch since 2014, and the east zone population is below the 20 year average but has a moderate year class from 2019 that is supporting recent harvest.

One interesting note for west zone perch fishing is that catch rates in 2022 strongly followed a pattern that we've been observing for a few years.

- When the water temperature is above 76 degrees in late July and early August, we have our highest angler catch rates of the year.

- When shorter days and cooler air temperatures in mid to late August drop the water temperature below 76 degrees the catch rate declines.

- Later in October and November when the water temperature falls below 60 degrees the catch rate greatly increases again.

We are finding that this pattern aligns well with the abundance of the spiny water flea (Bythotrephes).

- Water flea production drastically decreases above 76 degrees, which minimizes the amount of food available and makes perch a little easier to catch.

- Water flea production increases in late August and September while the temperature is under 76 degrees,

and then declines again when the temperature falls below 60 degrees in the late fall.

I would suggest targeting perch at the times when they are easiest to catch in west zone and that appears to be late July and early August, and then again after mid-October.

Watch the water temperature, though, as these timeframes could be different each year.

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