

Hi Betsy,

I appreciate you outlining details from our discussions and for sharing the Portage Anglers Club's interests with respect to managing the Manistique lakes fisheries. Based on the information you provided in your email; I will address each objective you mentioned.

Background

North Manistique (Round) Lake – Currently, North Manistique Lake is classified as a “stocked” lake. The Walleye fishery in North Manistique Lake is in a good place with an adult density that exceeds 2 adults per acre. For a population that has no natural reproduction, this is a good place to be. Because natural reproduction of Walleye is sparse to non-existent, Fisheries Division has a long-standing prescription and commitment to stocking this lake biennially with 42,500 spring fingerling Walleye. This prescription expires in 2034 and given the history of low to non-existent natural recruitment, stocking is likely to continue beyond that expiration date. North Manistique Lake has also been selected for long-term monitoring by our Tribal Coordination Unit out of Charlevoix. Fall recruitment surveys will be conducted annually, an adult Walleye census estimate will be conducted every 5 to 7 years, and a Status and Trends survey will also accompany spring census estimates.

Big Manistique Lake – Currently, Big Manistique Lake is classified as a “natural reproduction” lake. For more than 30 years, Big Manistique Lake has produced a year-class of young Walleye on its own with a significant year-class being represented about once every 5 to 7 years which is indicative of a self-sustaining population. However, in recent years, production of a significant year-class has not occurred yet (since 2019). The lake is due for a year with strong recruitment. Fisheries Division will continue to monitor natural recruitment of Walleye in Big Manistique Lake annually. There are several factors that might inhibit the production of a strong year class. In 2018 and 2019, Zebra Mussels and Round Goby were documented in the lake, respectively. Additionally, in 2013 our surveys captured Black Crappie, which had not been documented to occur in this lake historically. The presence of invasives and illegally introduced species do not provide favorable conditions for Walleye recruitment. Research has documented declining natural recruitment of Walleye when there are introductions of invasive species (namely, Zebra Mussels) and Black Crappie. Double Crested Cormorant are also present in Big Manistique Lake and there is a nesting/roosting population on the islands. Cormorant predation of Walleye does occur, especially on younger age classes of Walleye (Age-0 to Age-1). The spring period (April to June 1st) is likely the time when most predation occurs. Once Walleye reach 2 to 3 years of age, predation by cormorants is limited as these fish exceed the preferred gape width for avian predators (~15 inches).

South Manistique (Whitefish) Lake – Currently, South Manistique Lake is classified as a “natural reproduction” lake. However, no natural reproduction has been documented in the south lake since 2020. There have been zero fall fingerling Walleye captured in South Manistique Lake for four years. This is concerning. Despite drawbacks in Big Manistique Lake (e.g., invasives, Black Crappie, cormorants, etc.) there are still fall fingerlings being produced there annually. This is not the case in South Manistique Lake. Fisheries Division has tentatively scheduled a spring adult census estimate survey for South Manistique Lake to further evaluate the status of the Walleye fishery there. It is possible that our fall survey does not work as well in South Manistique Lake, so a

spring census estimate would help us determine if there are failures in recruitment occurring. The spring census estimate is scheduled to occur in either spring of 2025 or 2026.

Cormorants

Similar to last year, Fisheries Division has requested that Wildlife Services/APHIS conduct removal efforts in Big Manistique Lake in spring 2025. If conditions (e.g., staffing, weather) permit, Wildlife Services/APHIS will visit Big Manistique Lake. Their goal would be to depopulate the island nesting/roosting population that exists there. Aside from the nesting/roosting population, there is likely to be two migration periods: one in the spring (April 15th to June 1st) and one in the fall. I am less certain as to when the fall migration occurs. The Portage Anglers Club had a volunteer (Terry Watson) conduct harassment effort on Big Manistique Lake last year (2024). Fisheries Division recommends that there be a volunteer spring harassment campaign this upcoming spring. This could occur from April 15th to June 1st of 2025. Fisheries Division has a limited supply of single-shot launchers, primers, and bird bangers and can provide these supplies to the Portage Anglers Club upon request. Plans for 2025 are a short-term solution to prevent avian predation on juvenile fishes until funding for a larger inland lake program can be realized. On that note, Fisheries Division will be requesting a budget line-item for funding an inland cormorant management program. This budget will be proposed in next fiscal year's budget (2026), so we won't know until next fall as to whether this is supported by the State legislature. If you have additional questions about funding or a cormorant program in general, I encourage you to reach out to Doug Schultz (Lake Huron Basin Coordinator) as he is the primary contact for these matters.

Stocking

North Manistique (Round) Lake: There is a current stocking prescription for North Manistique Lake that will continue to 2034. Fisheries Division's goal is to stock approximately 42,500 spring fingerling Walleye every other year (biennially) during this ten-year period. Based on the recent assessment work that has been conducted there, Fisheries Division does not recommend that the Portage Anglers Club devote resources to stocking North Manistique Lake with fall fingerlings. The spring fingerlings appear to be working well there.

Big Manistique Lake: Since natural reproduction continues to be documented in Big Manistique Lake, even at lower levels, Fisheries Division does not support stocking spring fry Walleye at this time. Commitments to stocking can be re-evaluated annually as we continue to monitor natural reproduction using fall recruitment surveys. Fisheries Division supports the Portage Anglers Club interest to supplement natural reproduction of Walleye by stocking up to 10,000 fall fingerlings (Bays de Noc strain) on an every-other-year basis. Fisheries Division can conduct an evaluation of these stocking efforts by conducting surveys that help to differentiate stocked versus naturally reproduced individuals.

South Manistique Lake: Natural reproduction has been non-existent for four years consecutively. Fisheries Division supports drafting a prescription to stock South Manistique Lake. From 1979 to 1986, South Manistique Lake was stocked with an average 814,503 (range 80,000 to 2,700,000) spring fry Walleye. From 1991 to 1994, South Manistique Lake was stocked with an average 2,229,423 (range 1,461,000 to 3,856,692) spring fry Walleye. Stocking during the early 1980s and 1990s resulted in significant stunting of the population at a time when natural reproduction was also occurring alongside stocking. Stocking spring fry ceased in 1994.

Fisheries Division will propose two stocking scenarios for the Portage Anglers Club to consider:

Stocking Scenario 1: Fisheries Division will stock up to 2,000,000 spring fry Walleye (Bays de Noc strain) annually for three years. During this time, fall fingerling Walleye will not be stocked by the Portage Anglers Club. Fisheries Division will conduct annual fall recruitment surveys to evaluate survival of stocked spring fry Walleye. Justification for stocking up to 2,000,000 is based upon the presence of Black Crappie and other potential predators that exist in South Manistique Lake. Availability of spring fry can vary from year to year and is dependent on several factors both in the field and hatchery system. Thus, there is a risk that the desired number of spring fry may not be available in any given year.

Stocking Scenario 2: Fisheries Division will stock up to 2,000,000 spring fry Walleye (Bays de Noc strain) every other year for a period of 6 years. Portage Anglers Club (under permit) will stock up to 4,000 fall fingerling Walleye (Bays de Noc strain) every other year, during years when spring fry are not stocked. Alternating stocking of fry and fingerlings will provide Fisheries Division the opportunity to continue evaluating natural reproduction and the survival of stocked fall fingerlings, while differentiating between stocked versus naturally produced individuals. Availability of spring fry can vary from year to year and is dependent on several factors both in the field and hatchery system. Thus, there is a risk that the desired number of spring fry may not be available in any given year.

Regulations

Experimental Protected Slot Limit (Walleye) – Fisheries Division has received requests by area residents and members of the Portage Anglers Club to consider a ‘protected slot limit’ for Walleye in Big Manistique Lake. An experimental Protected Slot Limit regulation is listed within the State of Michigan’s Inland Lake Management Plan. The goal of an experimental Protected Slot Limit is to reduce the exploitation rate and increase spawning stock biomass for a population to increase the protection and sustainability of a naturally reproducing population. Additionally, increased size structure may result from reducing harvest on the larger individuals in a population.

Recommended waters for this regulation type require survey data that provides information on the population’s recruitment and growth dynamics, and an understanding of angling effort based on empirical data. Additionally, the implementation of a consistent protected slot limit will provide preferred simplicity to the overall regulatory framework and allow for a more robust evaluation of this regulation type in Michigan.

Annual fall recruitment surveys and a recent (2023) spring census estimate survey have been conducted for Big Manistique Lake, resulting in this lake being a good candidate for this regulation type. Additionally, an experimental slot limit was requested by the angling community and therefore satisfies a social requirement for acceptance of this regulation type. The proposed regulation would include an 18-to-23-inch protected slot limit and a reduced bag limit of 3 Walleye ≥ 15 inches, with only 1 Walleye over 23 inches allowed in the daily bag limit. Fisheries Division would not support deviation from this proposed experimental protected slot limit, as consistency is an important component to evaluate its effectiveness locally, and regionally.

This regulatory request would protect 42 percent of Walleye ≥ 15 inches and would protect both male and females, allowing protected fish more time to successfully spawn before being

susceptible to harvest. The goals being evaluated would include: 1) increase adult abundance, 2) increase natural reproduction, and/or 3) improve size structure of Walleye in a large, popular lake with reduced recruitment.

Fisheries Division will not consider an experimental Protected Slot Limit for South Manistique Lake at this time. Sufficient data are not currently available to biologically justify this regulation for this waterbody. However, there are plans to evaluate the density of adult Walleye in spring of 2025 or 2026. When these data are available, Fisheries Division can again consider this request.

There is a reasonable concern that enforcement of this regulation will be difficult given that South Manistique Lake and Big Manistique Lake are in proximity to each other, leading to confusion among anglers. Therefore, outreach and education will be a high priority requiring Fisheries Division, Law Enforcement Division, and the Portage Anglers Club to collaborate and ensure regulations are known and followed.

Fisheries Division recommends that the Portage Anglers Club draft a letter detailing their support for the requested experimental Protected Slot Limit regulation change.

Extended Harvest Season (Bass) - Fisheries Division has received requests by area residents and members of the Portage Anglers Club to consider an extended harvest season for bass in South Manistique Lake. Fisheries Division requested additional information from a member (John Rahn) of the Portage Anglers Club on 12 March 2024. Here is a summary of the additional information requested:

-Clearly state the request: What lake(s) are you interested in expanding the current harvest season? Fisheries Division is under the impression this regulation is only being considered by the Portage Anglers Club for South Manistique Lake, is this correct?

-The current regulation permits harvest up to December 31st, when would you have the harvest season extended to? (For example, would a proposed harvest season be extended to March 15th to coincide with the harvest closure of other species (e.g., Walleye and Northern Pike). Also, is there a proposed change in bag limit?

-Once a clear request has been made, do you have support from local constituents? For example, would the Portage Anglers Club, the Curtis Area Chamber of Commerce, etc., support this change? If so, it might be a good idea to obtain their support in writing. Do you have support from any Bass clubs? South Manistique Lake is one of the best largemouth bass fisheries in the U.P. – might be a good idea to have a discussion with any groups that host tournaments there. There is a very popular Veterans tournament held annually there. I recommend reaching out to their organizer and ask if it's something they would support.

Fisheries Division recommends that the Portage Anglers Club draft a letter, separate from the Walleye protected slot limit letter, detailing their request and highlighting their support for the proposed change.

One important note: The MDNR Natural Resources Commission is the regulatory authority over all changes in fish and game laws, not Fisheries Division. Fisheries Division prescribes survey work that monitors the status of aquatic resources and collects much needed information to guide their decision making.

Here is an outline/timeline of how Fish Orders (regulations) are processed by Fisheries Division and prepared for the Natural Resources Commission to review/consider.

1. Call for Recommendations (December to January)
2. Preparation of Fish Orders (January to April)
3. External Review Procedures (April to May 15th)
4. Regulations Review Committee (May 15th to June)
5. Fisheries Division Approval (June to July)
6. Final Drafts for Natural Resources Commission Review (Summer/Fall)
7. Department Approval (Summer/Fall)
8. Effective Dates and Fishing Guide (April 1st)

For the proposed regulation changes (Walleye PSL, or Extended Bass Harvest season), we would be tentatively looking at 2026 for implementation.