VHS fish disease found in yellow perch in Milwaukee

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MADISON – A week after the VHS fish disease was ruled the cause of a large round goby fish kill in Lake Michigan near Milwaukee, the same virus was detected in yellow perch collected about three miles from the fish kill site. The yellow perch were sampled as part of the Department of Natural Resource's VHS surveillance project and annual spawning assessments by the Lake Michigan Fisheries Work Unit in Milwaukee.

Two Wisconsin labs, the Wisconsin Diagnostic Veterinary Laboratory in Madison and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service La Crosse Fish Health Center confirmed the presence of VHS in the yellow perch sampled on June 5 according to Sue Marcquenski, the DNR fish health specialist. DNR staff have tested yellow perch from Lake Michigan annually since 2006, anticipating that the virus would eventually make its way to this population. So far, the yellow perch do not appear to be part of a fishkill situation.

VHS, or Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia, is not a human health threat, but can kill a wide range of native game fish, panfish and bait fish. It was first diagnosed in the Great Lakes region in 2005, and caused large fish kills in the lower Great Lakes in 2005 and 2006. The virus was first found in Wisconsin in May 2007 in freshwater drum from the Lake Winnebago system, and later that month in several species of fish from northern Green Bay and Lake Michigan.

DNR Fisheries Director Mike Staggs says that no immediate impact from VHS is expected to be seen in yellow perch populations. While VHS can kill fish of all ages, the biggest impact appears to be on very young fish. As a result, it could take several years before any effects show up in the population in decreased reproduction, if they show up at all.

The 2008 yellow perch season opens Monday, June 16. Staggs notes anglers should go out and enjoy their sport for the time being. "We'll continue to watch and study the situation, and we are well positioned to do that as part of a multi-state effort to monitor yellow perch populations and conduct research to find out what contributed to their decline," he says.

The perch VHS results are significant because perch is an important sport and commercial species, and the population in southern Lake Michigan has been depressed for about 15 years. A decade ago, to deal with the situation, DNR closed down

commercial fishing for the species to protect the remaining adult fish. In addition, sport bags were trimmed, and the opening date pushed back. In recent years, the population had been stabilizing. Staggs says the findings are not surprising and do not expand the known infected waters since VHS has been previously documented in Lake Michigan. Both yellow perch and round gobies are known to be highly susceptible to VHS.

“The results are also important, because they place VHS much farther south in Lake Michigan near Illinois and Indiana, and to the Mississippi River system via the Chicago ship canal,” he says.

VHS has never been associated with human illness since first being discovered in European fish decades ago (DHFS, May 2007). Fish can be infected by VHS, but may not show signs of disease. Such fish are safe to eat so long as the fish is properly cooked. However, as always, you should not eat fish you find dead, decomposing, or that appear sick, regardless of cause. Decomposing fish may attract other bacteria harmful to people.

While it is generally safe to handle fish, you should always wash your hands after handling fish.

The DNR has notified neighboring states and agencies of the finding. Thousands of fish were collected from about 75 other waters in Wisconsin this spring as part of a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded VHS surveillance project. Although many results are still pending, there have not been any other VHS positive test results so far. A map showing testing results for 2008 can be found on the DNR Web site.