

MINUTES

Lake Champlain Fish and Wildlife Management Cooperative Policy Committee Meeting
July 2, 2010
NYS DEC Office, Warrensburg, NY

List of Attendees attached

Pat Riexinger, the Director of the Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources, NYS DEC, opened the meeting; and attendees introduced themselves.

AGENCY UPDATES

Wayne Laroche, Vermont Fish and Wildlife

Wayne Laroche reported that overall the fisheries in Vermont were doing well this year, including obtaining good results on Sea Lamprey. A potential detection of VHS was made by PCR testing from a sample of fish collected from Lake Champlain. This needs to be verified by cell culture and VT is hoping that the initial result will turn out to be a false positive. (Follow-up note: all subsequent tests, including retesting the original samples, have come back negative.) As far as budget, Vermont will pretty much have what it had the last couple of years (similar funding level).

Bill Archambault, USFWS

Bill Archambault indicated that he is attending for USFWS, as Marvin Moriarty is doing "Gulf Duty" (i.e. BP oil spill). 2,000 of the USFWS Agency employees will be involved with the Gulf by the end of the summer. There is on-line training being provided to help accommodate this. Responding to the Gulf crisis is taking a lot of staff time. This is the highest priority for the USFWS, and because of that, could impact work on Lake Champlain.

LCCs -On the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, Lake Champlain was not included in any of the proposals approved this year. Some of the other projects (i.e. that have been approved) may have benefits to Lake Champlain (5 approved projects). There is an opening on the Steering Committee, LCC Committee.

As far as budget, the hatcheries are funded at a good level, and management assistance is stable. Bill indicated that there might not be a 2011 budget before the election. In year 2012, and beyond, the USFWS may see reductions in its budget. Right now, the budget is as good as it's been in a while.

Pat Riexinger, NYS DEC Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources (DFWMR)

Pat Riexinger reported that the NYS budget continues to be late. There was a license fee increase last year (sportsmen licenses). The DFWMR has already absorbed a 40 % cut in non personal service funding. Impacts include many limitations in how the Division operates, including large limitations on travel, and the establishment of a no overtime rule. This has included impacts to hatchery operations, but the USFWS lake trout were able to be picked up and stocked as part of the Great lakes stocking program. The DFWMR is trying to utilize Federal Aid, as part of making up for some of the program reductions in its Conservation Fund. In the last 2 years, the total of positions in the DFWMR has gone from 456 to 399. This is expected to diminish even further as the State is offering an early retirement incentive. Right now, Pat estimates that the DFWMR may lose between 20 and 30 positions as a result of that.

Climate Change in NYS is a Governor's Action Initiative and thus a priority at DEC. The DFWMR is building it in its program from an "adaptation" standpoint. Addressing climate change lines up and is a fit with the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives program (LCC). Climate change will be built in, as a component, in NY's SWAP (State Wildlife Action Plan). Pat noted that The Nature Conservancy conducted an assessment of the Lake Champlain area, looking at climate change impacts, and will be presenting this later in July (will be video casting this in the DEC Ray Brook office).

Some Policy Committee Business

It was noted that a letter had been generated, formally inviting the Providence of Quebec to become a member of the Cooperative. Pat Riexinger signed the letter for the Cooperative, and will see that it is sent.

A motion was made to accept the Minutes from last year's meeting, and the motion was accepted.

FISHERIES

Fisheries Technical Committee Annual Report

The intent was to make these available prior to the meeting, as was done last year. An opportunity to ask questions on the report is being provided. The reports get posted on the USFWS website. NYS DEC will reference these and provide a link to the reports on the recently established "Field Notes", a weekly e-mail newsletter established by the DFWMR.

Stocking Report and Current Plans

Tom Wiggins lead off this discussion by reviewing a handout. Stocking is a balance between the three agencies. A stocking plan was developed under a Strategic Plan that was established in 1977. Objectives were adjusted in 1995 and overall targets were reduced (approx 20%) and substantially for lake trout (- 64 %). The number of

fry/smolt has varied between VT and NY. There has been a big drop in steelhead stocking, largely resulting from the Salmon River in NY being the source, and with VHS now in the Great Lakes system.

Vermont's Ed Weed fish culture station EWFCFS is currently committed to Lake Champlain. Because EWFCFS uses Lake Champlain as its water source, concerns about the potential for VHS to get into Lake Champlain affected its suitability for stocking VT's inland waters. The EWFCFS had been producing substantial numbers of trout for inland VT programs. Losing the production of these fish would have been problematic. The USFWS helped out by producing trout for VT, to help make up the difference because of the adjustments in stocking locations.

In summary, the objectives have not changed. The targeted stocking numbers per species have changed a bit for different years, as the agencies have adjusted to balance things out. While the USFWS helped out VT with the inland stocking (as a result of VT's increased contribution to Lake Champlain stocking, because of VHS) the Service would like to wean off this, as they should be providing for Lake Champlain.

There was a brief discussion about the amount of information that was available and being obtained related to adjusting stocking rates. Brian Chipman indicated that alewife are being monitored but we do not have a lot of information that would help in looking at forage base and adjusting stocking rates (from the rates that were set in 1995). It was noted that the success of lamprey control efforts is a key factor in evaluating stocking rates.

Wayne Laroche suggested that the agencies should not wait on obtaining more data and information, for proceeding with evaluating stocking rates. Need to move forward on this.

NY stocks Seneca strain (lake trout); VT stocks lake trout whose genetic origin is mostly Seneca strain mixed with some other strains; Atlantic salmon have been under evaluation, as far as which strain should be stocked; steelhead are being evaluated as well (as far as which strain should be stocked). Tom Wiggins noted that the quality of the fish being stocked is immensely better than 15 years ago.

Salmonid Management

Any recommendations for changes in stocking would run through the Fisheries Technical Committee. Over the last year, the FTC and agencies have discussed how to evaluate stocking rates. As part of this, the hope is that in the future, the Cooperative will be better able to address questions pertaining to adjusting stocking rates.

Dave Tilton made a suggestion that the Fish Tech Committee should form a group for the purposes of determining how to assess and adjust stocking of the lake. The Policy Committee agreed that the Tech Committee should look at potential management actions, including how they would bear on stocking rates. The committee should identify

actions to evaluate and forecast impacts on the resource (i.e. determine ways for managing in the future). The Policy Committee agreed that the Fish Tech Committee will integrate recommendations from Vermont's Large Lakes Salmonid Team in developing an approach that incorporates population assessments along with standardized stocking and hatchery production protocols leading to the establishment of an ongoing adaptive management program. This approach, to be presented at the next Policy Committee Meeting, will include recommended sampling and assessment strategies to identify threshold parameters that will allow the Cooperative to adjust stocking rates in an adaptive management process. If approved by the Policy Committee this approach will be the basis for a management plan.

Wayne Laroche said the Tech Committee should be a little "bold" with this, and identify things to be tried (management actions). The assessment would likely inform the process of adjusting stocking rates in the future.

Brian Chipman provided a handout on salmon and lake trout condition, growth, etc. Salmon "condition" has gone down since the 1990's; Lake trout has gone up over the same period (may be due to the lake trout stocking reduction). Growth rates of salmon appear to be increasing. (Note that this is a preliminary estimate though). These data seem to indicate that the lake doesn't have a forage problem. EWFCS has data on condition of the hatchery smolts, so the FTC should look at these as well).

Landlocked Salmon – The presence of larger fish is evident in the lake over the past two years. Fish returning to the tributaries is low (Boquet and Winooski catch rates). Interest was expressed about ways to get more fish into the rivers; as well as whether the size/condition and time of stocking of fish resulted in them imprinting on the rivers, in order to get more fish into the rivers.

Forage fish Assessment (summary handout)

We have been monitoring historical stations since the late 1980s.

Alewife- are a "moving target" but a very significant added prey species, which started 5 years ago. Floating gill nets and acoustics are being used in sampling.

Smelt- the "1,000s are down to 100's as far as catch rate numbers; also missing a year class.

The handout provides more specifics including that in the Main Lake, there have been high catch rates in recent years for smelt but in some of the bays (e.g. Mallets Bay) they were 5X what they are now.

Alewife are very adaptable. Have not seen a deep lake population occur yet however.

Establishing a scientific based method for setting stocking rates

Dave Tilton reiterated that the Fish Tech Committee will integrate recommendations from Vermont's Large Lakes Salmonid Team in developing an approach that incorporates population assessments along with standardized stocking and hatchery production protocols leading to the establishment of an ongoing adaptive management program. This approach is to be presented at the next Policy Committee Meeting.

Economic assessment discussions

Dave Tilton and Mark Malchoff led this discussion, which reviewed some of what was available as far as economic assessments (e.g. Cornell, SUNY Plattsburg) and the nature of the data and info generated by others (level of value and what it included). They feel there is a real need to determine how to get updated economic information on the lake. A past approach by Cornell has been to use existing data. The Policy Committee determined that, on proceeding to obtain more economic data, the questions should be identified upfront: What do we really want to get out of these studies? Need both "the value of what the fishery is worth" and "the number of dollars of actual expenditures."

The Policy Committee asked Dave and Mark to work with staff from VT (Eric Palmer) and NY (Art Newell) on a clearer definition of what we want to learn from the study; identify key questions and scope of the survey, determine whether to address only salmonids vs. all species, consider how to factor in sea lamprey control benefits and broader economic benefits, and determine what other available data (e.g. 2010 Vermont Statewide Angler Survey and 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation) should be incorporated. They asked Dave and Mark to discuss these questions and survey techniques with SUNY and Cornell, develop cost estimates for various options, discuss these options with Eric and Art, and present options to the Policy Committee before the next annual meeting.

Morning Break

WILDLIFE

Establishment of a Lake Champlain Wildlife Management Committee

It's been years since the Coop had a Wildlife Management Committee between the F&W Policy Committee and Wildlife Technical Committee. Dave Tilton was on such a committee much earlier with Bob Inslerman (NYSDEC) and Ron Reagan (VTFWD). Lance Durfey indicated that he doesn't see any drawbacks in not having a wildlife committee at this level. Cormorants, waterfowl, and colonial birds are some of the wildlife related issues and agency representatives and staff are already interacting. USFWS – would like to have a presence on such a committee (i.e. Migratory bird issues) if it is established.

Wayne Laroche noted that it would be beneficial to have this coordinated approach.

As a result of the discussion it was decided to send Wayne the names of the people recommended for such a Lake Champlain Wildlife Management Committee, along with the Cooperative Agreement that refers to the plan to have such a committee.

Habitat Restoration in the Basin

Frank Pendleton (USFWS) provided a presentation on Partners for Fish and Wildlife (projected off a laptop). This included showing some of the work being done. Various habitat improvement projects were presented: wetlands projects, upland habitat mgt – early successional habitat projects, riparian restoration – livestock fencing, habitat enhancement – willow planting; barrier removal and culvert replacement (aquatic focus). Presently most of the work is being done in Vermont due to USDA and Vermont Agency of Agriculture cost share. However, Aquatic Organism Passage work is also taking place on the New York side, and the USFWS is open to supporting riparian and wetland projects with willing cooperators on the New York side.

Patty Riexinger, noted that she is looking to put a lot of focus in this area as it fills so many needs and has huge potential; plus it supports the focus on Climate Change.

VT and NYS have been making efforts in these areas as well (e.g. DEC working w DOT on replacing culverts; VT has a program of cost sharing with towns – on replacing culverts for example.

Colonial Waterbird Mgt

Joe Racette described the creation of a “cormorant communications committee” for the purposes of fostering communication between the agencies and NGOs. They have worked through this, and have learned that if we do not take action, people will do so on their own. It was also noted that if you disturb cormorant nesting, they go to another place, so interagency collaboration is important. USDA/APHIS Wildlife Services is a leader in cormorant management on Lake Champlain.

NY and VT have been managing to protect shorebird habitat by egg oiling and shooting. As long as the shorebird habitat is taken care of then the job is done as far as wildlife, but not as far as fisheries. There are different perceptions of the problems, so a management plan has been initiated that could serve as a guide for addressing the different perspectives.

APHIS, Brad Young, the Vermont Cooperative Research Unit, University of Vermont, and others have formed an informal group to work on this effort.

Stacy Preusser and Allen Grosser (representatives from APHIS Wildlife Services) presented the need for population objectives for the whole lake, not just the individual states, for all colonial birds. Diane Pence, from USFWS migratory birds, has been somewhat involved. In NY, work is taking place under an existing depredation order.

Lack of data on the ecological impacts of cormorant predation is impeding establishing population goals. Note that goals for most colonial birds are to increase numbers.

Cormorants and ring bill gulls are the primary problematic species.

Wayne Laroche suggested using an adaptive management approach, and taking a big enough bite to have an impact in protecting fisheries, noting that cormorants would always rebound if substantially affected by controls.

A “density-based approach” is being discussed by the informal group. The plan is to develop an informed management approach by looking at data from other waters, and using representative physical metrics as a surrogate for fisheries data. For example, by comparing Champlain to Oneida Lake and Georgian Bay where Cormorant-fisheries interaction problems have been studied, they hope to scale Champlain’s data against data from the other sites to propose a number of cormorants per km² that would be consistent with those sites. Without an independent fisheries database, this approach seems to be the only way to make environmentally-based, rather than arbitrary decisions on appropriate Cormorant densities in relation to fisheries conditions.

Stacey Preusser indicated that APHIS is working on cormorant diet analyses. She asked if agencies are looking at wounds (fish wounds). It was noted that it is hard to distinguish wounds (i.e. what causes them). She also asked if the agencies are seeing effects on stocking. It was noted that stocking dates and times have been adjusted to reduce cormorant predation. It was noted that between smelt and alewife, there is no shortage of food for cormorants; the limitation is nesting availability (and related threat of disease).

APHIS needs population goals for Colonial Waterbird Plan that they have under preparation, and hope to have results of the density-based analyses this fall.

A joint effort will be made to establish targeted estimate numbers for Lake Champlain (based on using other waters as described). The group that does this (Fisheries Technical Committee) will give their results to the Fish Management Committee, and they will share it with the Wildlife Technical Committee (and Wildlife Management Committee if one is formed), and they (both fish and wildlife committees) will then submit to the Policy Committee.

APHIS indicated that NGOs and private entities may object to the recommendations that evolve. Wayne responded that the agencies need to manage the resource; and that cormorants can also be controlled elsewhere.

Lunch Break

Sea lamprey Control

Bradley Young presented the status of the Leahy Appropriation Sea Lamprey Account. He noted there is a \$1.3 M balance on the books today;

\$1.2 M was appropriated in 2010 but only \$700,000 has been authorized for spending at this time. This means there is an \$800,000 available balance, even after accounting for all FY2010 costs, future obligated costs (such as Morpion barrier), and recurring costs. Overall the budget is in good shape at this point.

Brian Chipman next reported on treatments (see handout): Treatment of the Lamoille River in 2009 went well. Lewis Creek and 4 other NY streams are scheduled for this Fall: (Putnam, Little Ausable, Salmon, Ausable) Lewis Creek was done last in 2006.

It was noted that when flows are high, lamprey are getting above the falls on some streams-rivers. Steve and Brian put together a history of wounding rates on salmon. Salmon wounding rates are lower than lake trout (main lake). The usual difference in wounding rate between the “inland sea” and main lake is narrowing.

While the wounding rate has been coming down, we are still not at our targeted number. Lake trout wounding rates have been much higher in the northern part of the lake versus the southern part.

USFWS is picking up on NY treatment management with Lance now gone.

Eric Palmer spoke on lampricide treatment permitting procedure improvements. This is still a work in progress including a current request for a multi-river multi-year permit. However, endangered species permits are still being applied for on a year-to-year basis.

The multi-year permit approach for sea lamprey will save staff time and alleviate timing problems associated with receiving permits late in the year. The permit will potentially be good for 4 rivers, for 5 years, and could potentially be reopened and amended during the 5 yr period. This will provide more predictability.

Bill Schoch noted that in NY, the multi-year permit has been a huge help.

Federal leadership model for sea lamprey control

Dave Tilton reported that Great Lakes Fisheries Commission funding secured by Senator Leahy has potentially provided an opportunity for the USFWS to agree to the request by New York DEC and Vermont F&W that the USFWS assume primary responsibility for the sea lamprey control program. Up to \$1.2 million dollars is available from the \$6.5 million-dollar appropriation for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission that was secured by Senator Leahy in FY2010. Negotiations and planning are ongoing that may allow these funds to initiate this shift to a new model.

The Cooperative Agreement Addendum developed by Dave, Eric Palmer, and Art Newell, including some coordination with Policy Committee members was made available with highlighted sections that address how the Cooperative’s agencies will react if Federal funding to support the expanded USFWS dries up. The \$1.2 million

currently under discussion is sufficient to run the federal leadership model for up to three years, to 2013, assuming recurring annual appropriations of \$700,000 starting in FY2011. Note that costs vary from year to year, because the streams treated vary and the purchasing of the lampricide varies as well (per year).

The time line for modifying the current structure and process (as described above) hinges on when the USFWS can provide for the required administrative process, and Congress (Senator Leahy) getting this into the annual budgeting process. New USFWS biologists supported through this proposal would be “Term biologists”.

Pat Riexinger indicated that she would also talk to NYSDEC’s Legislative Office to help push what is being pursued here, with the offices of NY’s Federal representatives.

Staffing Plan for lamprey control

Bradley Young presented a staff chart to show additional positions and current positions involved with lamprey control. Note that the USFWS is the lead for getting things set up on treatments, but it will need on the ground state staff help with the treatments.

Sea Lamprey Control Alternatives Workgroup

Dave Tilton next reported on the Sea Lamprey Control Alternatives Workgroup. While there is funding for research proposals (for alternative control measures) the group received no proposals in its latest request for proposals. The low funding level of \$50,000 may be part of the reason for the low response. There is a real effort here, but recently the Workgroup is making little progress toward feasible approaches.

Federal Funds for sea lamprey barrier initiatives

Bradley Young reported that more than an adequate amount of USACE funds are accessible if matched.

Three projects have been identified:

The LaPlatte River barrier project – VTDFW has secured \$195,000 in “state capital improvement funds” to match the USACE for a lamprey barrier feasibility study, and construction if the feasibility results look good.

The Great Chazy has been tabled until the trap modification and new lip installed on the existing barrier are determined to be successful, or not, in solving the “leaky barrier” problem. If lamprey are found to still be passing the Great Chazy barrier, the USACE will be consulted on steps that need to be taken to restore the full integrity of that lamprey barrier

On the Little Ausable project, NY was looking at the NY bond act funding as part of this (i.e. design work). NY will find out what the status is on that).

Bill Schoch indicated that there may be a landowner issue involved here. The USACE and NYSDEC are not able to cooperate on using Bond Act money for legal reasons. It was noted that members of the Coop are having trouble reaching the USACE contact for this barrier program right now.

Bill Schoch and Brad Young need to discuss moving the Little Ausable barrier project forward; Brad will arrange a meeting between Bill Schoch, Art, and Dave Tilton and provide a list of items to discuss

INVASIVE SPECIES

Champlain Canal and Spiny waterflea

Dave Tilton reported that staff for Senators Leahy, Schumer, and Gillibrand have been supportive of efforts to develop an invasive species barrier on the Champlain Canal. New York State Canal Corporation and U.S. Army corps of engineers have been engaged in discussions and planning for a feasibility study authorized in the Corps' authorizing legislation. It is an ongoing and long-term effort to get a canal barrier in place for Lake Champlain.

In the meantime, it was noted that the spiny waterflea showed up in Great Sacandaga Lake a few years ago and the fear here is that it could come down the river and then get to Lake Champlain. However, with funding appropriated by Senator Leahy to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in 2009, the USFWS carried out a study that determined overland transport in bait wells and bilges is a much more likely route than passive flow through the canal system between Great Sacandaga Lake and Lake Champlain.

Furthermore, proposals for engineering solutions in the canal ranged from \$10 M to \$100 million.

Boat Launch Stewardship Program

Dave Tilton led off the discussion, followed by a presentation by Meg Modley of the Lake Champlain Basin Program about the Basin Program's Boat Launch Stewards. The Basin Program has had a strong presence at Mallets Bay and other popular boat launch sites on Lake Champlain. A lot is being done on the Vermont side; DEC boat launches also have receptacles for anglers-boaters to dump AIS that is picked up from boats, etc.

Stewards also do some related work with nonprofits. Stewardship Programs in ADK area include: Lake George, Lake Champlain and many ADK lakes.

Some findings from boat launch surveillance (*as showed in the presentation*):

- 80% of boaters are taking some prevention measures;
- 8 % are picking up some species, as part of boating
- 4% of these species are invasive.

AIS Rapid Response Action Plan

There is a rapid response task force under development. It is important, and NY still needs to provide a member. (Quebec and VT have designated members)

Invasive Species Federal Funds to NYS DEC

All of the Great Lakes States got \$850,000.

\$850,000 for NYS was for implementation of actions in NY's ANS plan (for activities under New York's management and control of ANS plan in NYS). The group asked about how that funding was being utilized. The ANS unit-office in NYSDEC, can likely shed some information on this.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

American Eels

Bill Archambault, USFWS, reported on this item. The USFWS was petitioned several years ago to list eels. After this review, it was determined that they did not warrant listing, but rather eels were considered a Species of Special Concern. However, the USFWS may be reevaluating relisting, due to a new petition. The Hydro- power industry is the major concern, as a lot of eels are churned up at these facilities. Depending on the outcome of the petition The American eel could become a federally-listed species.

Round Goby and Tench in Quebec

Dave Tilton presented PowerPoint slides prepared by Pierre Dumond of the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife. Gobies are showing up heavy in fish diets in Quebec. 2004-2009 was a rapid invasion period. Gobies are not in Lake Champlain yet.

Tench seem to be spreading rapidly in Lake Champlain.

Sea Lamprey Barrier Construction on Morpion Stream

Bradley Young presented cost increases for the project. The original \$340,000 2005 estimate, with design changes and cost inflation, was increased to \$450,000 in 2008, and is now up to \$730,000 total cost. The Pike River system is the largest uncontrolled producer of lamprey left in the Champlain Basin (140,000 lamprey larvae across 4 yr classes). There are no other approved options for treatment here. Cost –benefit is good here, compared to other waters for lamprey control.

Bradley requested approval for a funding increase of \$270,000 [to go from \$450,000 to \$720,000]. Eric Palmer said the cost of this project needs to be considered in the context of the whole program. We currently spend over \$500,000 a year on sea lamprey control, and much more for Salmonid restoration activities including stocking. We need to address all of the major sea lamprey producing tributaries to reach our target wounding

rates. After being further informed about the effect of this increase on the total budget, the Policy Committee unanimously agreed to authorize the increase in spending.

Motion was then made to Adjourn the Meeting

Motion passed.

Meeting adjourned.

Attendance List- Lake Champlain Fish & Wildlife Management Cooperative Policy Committee Meeting –July 2, 2010, NYSDEC Warrensburg, NY Office	
Name	Affiliation
Pat Riexinger Art Newell Rob Fiorentino	Director, NYSDEC, Div.of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources Bureau of Fisheries, NYSDEC R5 NYSDEC
Bill Schoch Emily Zollweg Lance Durfey Joe Racette Stacy Racette Stacy Preusser	R5 NYS DEC R5 NYSDEC R5 NYSDEC NYSDEC NYSDEC USDA Wildlife Services
Allen Gosser Mark Malchoff Henry Bouchard	USDA Wildlife Services Lake Champlain Sea Grant USFWS, Eisenhower NFH
Mark Scott Tom Wiggins Shaun Keeler	VT Fish & Wildlife; Wildlife VT Fish & Wildlife Bureau of Fisheries, NYSDEC
Shawn Good Eric Palmer Bradley Young	VT Fish & Wildlife VT Fish & Wildlife USFWS
Stephen Smith Dave Tilton Chet MacKenzie	USFWS USFWS VT Fish & Wildlife
Brian Chipman Bernie Pientka Wayne Laroche	VT Fish & Wildlife VT Fish & Wildlife VT Fish & Wildlife
Frank Pendleton Bill Archambault	USFWS USFWS