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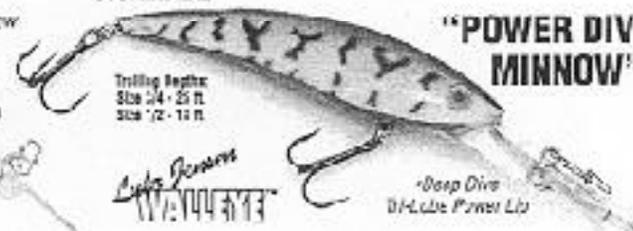


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Walleye News and Fact File

CONSERVATIVE FISHING REGULATIONS RECOMMENDED TO PROTECT LAKE ERIE WALLEYE AND SMALLMOUTH BASS

Proposals would lower walleye catch limit, close smallmouth bass spawning season

COLUMBUS, OH — Conservation measures designed to provide long-term stability for Lake Erie's walleye and smallmouth bass populations are being proposed by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife and may result in significant new fishing regulations in the 2004 season. The proposals will be finalized and presented later this summer to the Ohio Wildlife Council to be effective March 1, 2004.

ODNR's Division of Wildlife plans to propose reducing the springtime limit on walleyes from four to three fish per day from March 1 - April 30. The limit for walleyes outside of the March 1- April 30 period is planned to stay at 6 fish per day. Also planned is a proposal creating a year-round walleye size limit of 15 inches.

"Poor weather conditions during recent springs have resulted in inconsistent and minimal walleye reproduction in Lake Erie," said Gary Isbell, executive administrator for the Division of Wildlife's Fish Management and Research Program. "The outlook for the 2003 hatch is not good, based on the cold, stormy spring this year."

Isbell said that while many anglers are reporting some of the best catches seen in recent years, the concern is for the future of the fishery since reproduction has been poor in two of the past three years.

The Lake Erie Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission has advised member agencies to prepare for a "40%-60% reduction in total allowable catches (TAC) for 2004."

"All Lake Erie agencies are examining regulation options best-suited to their area to meet this challenge," said Isbell.

State fisheries biologists are also proposing closing of smallmouth fishing in May and June, when the popular sport fish are laying eggs and guarding their nests.

The proposal comes in response to concern that the round goby, an invasive fish species, is adversely impacting smallmouth populations by preying on bass eggs and fry. Gobies arrived from eastern Europe in the ballast water of transoceanic ships and have multiplied rapidly during the 1990s, becoming abundant throughout Lake Erie.

Research conducted by the Division of Wildlife in conjunction with The Ohio State University over the last three years has documented that gobies are having a negative impact on smallmouth reproduction, as higher populations of round gobies dramatically decrease the number of smallmouth in the nesting areas.

In addition, tagging studies conducted in cooperation with the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association and Ohio Sea Grant have confirmed limited movements or small home ranges of smallmouth bass. Fish that are tagged and released are likely to be found at a later time in the same location. This raises concerns about removing smallmouth during the spawning season, and explains how serious nesting failures are to local populations.

Another potential negative factor impacting smallmouth bass is the double-crested cormorant, a bird that dives to feed on small fish including small bass. Neither gobies nor cormorants were present in Lake Erie just 10 years ago.

No fishing regulation changes are proposed for yellow perch or white bass.

The Division of Wildlife, based on a hearing to be

scheduled this summer, consultation with anglers, and further review of the recent research information, will finalize the proposals between now and September. Ohio Wildlife Council action will likely take place in October 2003.

Captains map strategy to fight walleye limits

CATAWBA ISLAND — The Lake Erie Charter Boat Association thinks there's something fishy with new walleye limits proposed by state biologists. So they're pitching their own plan. At a sizable LECBA gathering recently at Holiday Village Motel and Charter Service, the charter captains talked shop with Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife personnel.

The controversy lies with ODNR's recommendation to drop the Lake Erie walleye bag limit from four to three fish per day during March and April, effective next year. Declining walleye numbers are blamed for the change.

The daily walleye limit would remain at six fish during the remainder of the year.

However, LECBA President Bob Collins said his group's 19-member board of directors favors a different strategy: Lower the bag limit to four from September through April, while retaining the six-fish limit during lucrative springtime months.

"(The charter captains) didn't see any evidence that would indicate that that wouldn't be better than cutting the spring limit to three for 60 days during the 'prime time' they'd be having their spawn," Collins said.

He said fishing captains took a "percentage hit" on profits a couple years ago when the state limit was lowered — and one way or the other, captains will incur another percentage hit this time around, too.

In fact, Good Time Charlie's Charters captain Charlie Eulitt has said the proposed limit reduction has "got quite a few people on the warpath."

"The burning issue now is, if the object is to protect the females, then a majority of the board feels that they'd like the possibility of closing the season, starting in fall and continuing on through to spring."

Collins said the meeting was productive, and that

ODNR officials made a good presentation. He said both groups have vested interest in preserving the Lake Erie fishery.

Other proposed ODNR fishing changes:

An all-year walleye size limit of 15 inches.

A moratorium on smallmouth bass fishing in May and June, during spawning season. Biologists blame nest predation by round gobies as a key reason.

The Ohio Wildlife Council is expected to vote on the proposals Oct. 15.

Big fish escape, but anglers rescued

KELLEYS ISLAND (July '03) — When crashing waves swamped angler Pat Byle's boat, his 20-foot Ranger filled with water up to the instrument console. Soaking wet, he radioed for help, battling to stay aboard amid 8-foot whitecaps near Gull Island Shoal.

Luckily, Byle and his passenger were rescued. But when he tried to transfer his fish onto a competitor's boat, two beefy walleye got loose and swam off into the depths -costing Byle \$50,000, a \$35,000 boat and a Wal-Mart RCL Walleye Tour title.

Byle's boating accident — and fish misfortunes — capped a decisive day of Lake Erie walleye tournament action. Had the Wisconsin man not lost control of his pair of fish in roiling waters north of Kelleys Island, he said he would have returned with about 30 pounds of walleye. That would have defeated the other nine Wal-Mart RCL finalists by a 10-ounce margin.

"I'm not 100 percent sure what happened," Byle said afterward, visibly shaken. "It happened so fast."

The incident happened during a gale warning about 9:30 a.m., near a popular fishing site about two miles south of the Canadian border. Northeast winds of up to 25 knots churned the lake, spawning 6- to 8-foot waves.

Bob Domek, an Illinois pro fisherman, heard the distress call and motored to the scene. He pulled Byle and his amateur partner, Steve Anderson of Illinois, from the lake.

"We saw them yelling and screaming," Domek said. "It took a while to get there because the waves were so big."

Domek said only about 4 inches of Byle's boat were above water by the time he arrived.

"When we pulled up, I knew we only had a couple of chances to do this. So I told them when they get the chance, to just dive into the boat," Domek said.

The stranded men managed to board Domek's boat — but two of the five walleye didn't.

U.S. Coast Guard Station Marblehead dispatched a 47-foot rescue vessel and a 27-foot boat to the area.

Boater's Emergency Service also sent out two boats to join the search effort.

Coast Guard personnel eventually located the swamped boat and floating debris, then towed the boat to shore.

Byle survived the day's winner-take-all, Wal-Mart RCL fish-off with three walleye totaling 15 pounds, 15 ounces — good for sixth place out of the 10 finalists. David Kolb of Riverview, Mich., won the event with five walleye totaling 29 pounds, 6 ounces.

After rescuing the anglers, Domek's boat was battered by waves, shattering his windshield. The boat started to flood, but the men were able to pump out the water and get back to shore.

Byle said Lake Erie conditions worsened in a matter of minutes that morning.

"We went out to make another pass when a wave came over the back of the boat. So we had to get water out of the boat," Byle said. "I couldn't get the engine going when another wave came about 10 seconds later.

"I went to call for my day and another wave hit before I could give my coordinates. I'm very happy to be alive. I'm very proud of what Bob did."

The Wal-Mart RCL Walleye Tour also visited Port Clinton in April 2001.

In April 2000, six competitors in a Port Clinton InFisherman Professional Walleye Trail tournament rescued four swamped amateur anglers during a storm near Niagara Reef, about nine miles north of Camp Perry.

From Editor, page 2

found ourselves in 3-5 footers and immediately turned back for a roller coaster ride back to safe harbor. The lake had gone from calm to heavy seas in only an hour or two.

In early September I had the opportunity to fish Lake Ontario with a good friend and charter Captain, Captain Frank Godina of Top Gun charters. Frank fishes Lake Erie in the spring and moves his boat to Olcott, NY for Salmon fishing from July through October. We had a great day on the lake, even though conditions were a little rough and a recent Lake Ontario storm had churned the lake up causing it to turn over and scattered the King salmon. We did get three hook ups that morning and I landed a 20+ pounder (see story inside).

Finally, the Ohio DNR is proposing new regulations for walleye. They propose to reduce the daily limit from 4 to 3 during the spring spawn from March through April as well as creating a year-round 15 inch walleye size limit. The Lake Erie Charter Boat Association (LECBA) would like to see the proposal changed and have offered their own view of lowering the bag limit from six to four from September through April.

Each of these proposals has merit and you can make a good argument for both, depending on what numbers you look at. Numbers can be deceiving though. Mark twain said "there are lies, damn lies, and then there are statistics".

Whichever proposal is adopted I feel all anglers will benefit in the long run. These conservation efforts will help us all enjoy walleye fishing for generations to come in wonderful Lake Erie. Till next time, good fishing.