

Minutes from 2008 Muskie Summit February, 23, 2008

In Attendance:

Club Representatives

Fred Lederer	OHMC, President	ohmcprez@sbcglobal.net
Aaron Kirkinburg	OHMC, Vice Pres.	the6kirsks@roadrunner.com
Neil O'Brien	OHMC, & Ch. 41 MI	
John Oldfield	MI Chapter 41, Past Officer	joldfield@limitedbrands.com
Rob VanGorder	MI Chapter 41, VP	rcv@kokosing.biz
Dennis Neidert	MI Chapter 41	dneidert05@yahoo.com
Mark Pauling	MI Chapter 41, President	paulinmf@bp.com
Chris DePaola	MI Chapter 23, Past Officer	chris.depaola@us.nestle.com
Don Clowes	MI Chapter 23	dcclowes@aol.com
Sherm Champler	MI Chapter 23	sshermo10@aol.com
David Creech	MI Chapter 56, Vice Pres.	danacreech@sbcglobal.net
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John Bigham	MI Chapter 56, Membership	553js@hotmail.com
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Joel Johnson	MI Chapter 56	joel.johnson@earthlink.net
Gordon Selden	MI Chapter 19, President	cufishn@wilshire.net
Bob Fertal	MI Chapter 19	fertal@redcross-cleveland.org

Note: MI Chapter 41 = Central Ohio Chapter of Muskies, Inc.
MI Chapter 23 = Cleveland Chapter of Muskies, Inc.
MI Chapter 56 = Southwest Ohio Muskie Association
MI Chapter 19 = Akron-Canton Muskie Maniacs

Division of Wildlife Representatives

Ray Petering	Executive Administrator, Fish Management & Research
Jim Marshall	Assistant Chief
Scott Hale	Inland Fisheries Program Administrator
Kevin Page	Fisheries Biologist, Inland Fish Research
Jon Denlinger	Supervisor, Inland Fish Research
Elmer Heyob	Fish Hatchery Program Administrator
Larry Goedde	Fish Supervisor D2 Northwest OH
Tim Parrett	Fish Supervisor D4 Southeast OH
Debbie Walters	Fisheries Biologist D5 Southwest OH

Time: February 23, 2008 1:00-3:00 PM

Location: Buckeye Hall of Fame, Columbus OH, 1421 Olentangy River Road

Minutes: Larry Goedde will take minutes of the meeting and distribute a draft for review.

Meeting Objective: To introduce Ohio's new Muskie Angler Log (MAL), provide an update on current issues and opportunities, and gather club input on Ohio's muskie program.

Welcome & Introductions: Scott Hale

Scott welcomed everyone to the second annual muskie summit. He reviewed the agenda and invited each person to introduce themselves by giving their name, club affiliation, state any office held in the club, and a description of their 2007 muskie season.

Muskie and Production—Elmer Heyob, Ohio Division of Wildlife

Elmer presented information on:

1. **production capacity** of Ohio Division of Wildlife hatcheries to raise muskies
2. **disease issues and concerns** in raising muskie in our hatcheries
3. **minnow fund** current needs
4. **stocking strategy** for program lakes
5. possible **new opportunities** for muskie fishing

1. Production Capacity of Muskie

We produce advanced fingerling muskie at Kincaid and London State Fish Hatcheries because these facilities have a good supply of the cold water. It is very important to finish raising the advanced fingerlings in ponds rather than troughs to improve their quality and survival after stocking.

At last year's muskie summit, we talked about needing help purchasing minnows to feed muskie and the clubs pledged to contribute to a **Minnow Fund** to purchase minnows for our hatcheries. This past year we ran into a new obstacle – the threat of a new fish disease (*Viral hemorrhagic septicemia--VHS*) limiting our options to purchase minnows. Staff at the, St. Marys Fish Hatchery found a way to raise minnows in the same ponds as channel catfish, allowing us to produce minnows of the right size at the right time for feeding muskie. Raising our own minnows lowered our production cost and provided a more reliable method of obtaining minnows. This new practice does not eliminate the need for a “*Minnow Fund*” or financial assistance from clubs because minnows are very expensive to raise and require expensive commercial feeds, herbicides, aerators and other equipment.

Below is a brief history of our muskie production and program:

1983—started raising advanced fingerlings and stocked in the fall

1990—limited stocking muskies to 8 program lakes

1999—improved production techniques to consistently raise advanced fingerlings.

1997 to 2001 — raised as many as 38,000 muskies (wee above our program goal) to supplement Pymatuning Lake following a disease outbreak. Many of these fish, especially in the early part of this period, were completely trough reared and they were not as good of quality as today's pond-reared fish.

2002-2007-- maintained program goal has been 17,600 muskies and stocked at one per acre in 8 program lakes. (Clearfork has been stocked at 2 per acre t 3 years to correct a decline in our primary brood stock lake)

2007&2008—made hatchery improvements increase overall capacity.

2. Disease Concerns and Issues

We are concerned about diseases killing fish in our hatcheries and in the wild, but are particularly concerned about hatchery contaminations. If VHS is detected in one of our hatcheries we must destroy all fish at the hatchery and stop production until the hatchery has been decontaminated – *This is by Federal Regulation.*

It is critical for us to keep diseases out of our hatcheries. We are presently vulnerable in two areas:

1. Collecting eggs from the wild, and
2. Bringing minnows into hatcheries from outside sources.

To combat these threats we are:

1. funding research to treat the eggs with Iodine in attempt to kill the VHS virus before the eggs are brought into the hatchery
2. raising minnows in-house to eliminate the potential of bringing in diseases. Early in production we feed carp fry to our muskie fry. In the past we collected these fish from the wild, making us vulnerable to disease introduction, so in 2008 we will raise carp in our hatcheries from disease-free carp brood stock.

3. Minnow Fund

Although we don't need clubs to directly purchase minnows, we are still interested in donations from clubs to help us raise muskie. For example, last year we used the Minnow Fund to purchase an aerator that will help us avoid losing minnows during low oxygen periods in our ponds. In addition, we recently purchased a new seine to assist in harvesting fish out of our ponds through the "*Minnow Fund*". For the foreseeable future, there will be a need for items that will improve our ability to produce muskie.

4. Stocking Strategy

Our production target is 1-fish per acre in our 8 program lakes, or 17,600 fish annually. Meeting the program goal necessitates retaining surplus numbers of fish during the growing season to make up for any losses experienced along the way. If you look at our production history we typically finish with 3 to 5 thousand surplus advanced fingerlings. Up to this point the surplus has gone to various program lakes plus Lake Milton.

5. New Opportunities for Muskie Fishing

We are proposing to:

1. Make Lake Milton a program lake
2. Stock a new lake -- East Fork Lake in Southwest Ohio—increasing the number of program lakes; but at the same time we would like to
3. Drop Cowan Lake from the list of program lakes because of the lack of returns.

Our new target production level would be 20,634 stocked in 9 program lakes.

Question: Have you ever considered Grand Lake St. Marys as a muskie lake?

Response: Too shallow, too warm, too large to stock at even 1 per acre.

Question: Are you going to continue to stock Pymatuning Lake?

Response: At this time we would only stock surplus in Pymatuning Lake. We will be stocking walleye in a joint effort to recover the walleye fishery in Pymatuning Lake.

Question: Did you consider stocking CJ Brown Reservoir in the southwest?

Response: We did consider CJ Brown and it would do well also, but we feel that East Fork is the best location at this time. It has more shoreline development, lots of good habitat, large forage base and good water quality.

Question: Any lakes in northwest Ohio that you would consider?

Response: Unfortunately, none in that region of the state that have good muskie habitat.

Program Update

Regulations—Scott Hale, Ohio Division of Wildlife

At the 2007 muskie summit, we agreed to propose a change in the muskie bag limit dropping it from 2 per day to 1 per day. That change is being proposed March 2, 2008 at the Open House meetings at each district office and at Sandusky. We will be taking public comments for or against that proposal. If it passes it will go into effect July 1, 2008. We will put out news releases informing anglers of the new regulation. However, the 2008-2009 fishing regulations brochure will already be printed so the rest of this first year our officers will give a little latitude and give warnings. If it passes it will be in the printed fishing regulations for next year.

History of Regulations in Fisheries

- Fishing regulations are one of our most powerful fisheries tools.
- The development of regulation is a science-based process, including biological and social information.

Fishing Regulation Timeline

- 1900 to 1950— minimal fishing regulations (the feeling during this time was that there was not enough sport fishing pressure to impact the resource).
- 1950 to 1980— liberal regulations to maximize harvest (the philosophy during this time was that harvest was actually good for lakes to prevent them from overcrowding);
- 1980's to present—fishing regulations were used to increase catch rates (or to shorten the time between bites), distribute the harvest to more anglers, and prevent over harvest.

When making a decision to implement a fishing regulation we look at both the **biological** and **sociological** aspects of the regulation.

Biological Considerations

Anglers Success: catch rates and harvest (kept);
and

Fish Population Characteristics: growth, recruitment (how many survive whether spawned or stocked) , mortality, and length distribution

Social Considerations

Is the regulation desirable, acceptable, and enforceable?

Types of Fishing Regulations

Closed seasons—only one closed season is being used in Ohio on Lake Erie smallmouth bass. Generally, closed systems are not effective or needed in inland systems. Natural reproduction in inland systems is usually limited by habitat. For stocked fisheries, closed seasons have no application.

Angler Methods Restrictions (such as no trolling)

We avoid using these restrictions in Ohio because we want anglers to be successful. We want them to use every tool they can to help them catch a fish and believe that such regulations are values-based and limit opportunities.

Daily (Bag) Limits

In inland waters, daily limits are primarily used to distribute harvest to more anglers. In Lake Erie, we use daily limits to actually lower harvest and to keep anglers within an annual harvest quota as well as distribute harvest. The Lake Erie harvest quota is set by an interagency commission. For daily limits to be effective in limiting harvest, the daily limit must routinely be caught by a large number of anglers on a regular basis. That occurs in Lake Erie but not in inland systems. Daily limits in inland systems are effective in distributing the harvest to more anglers.

Length Limits

Length limits are used to increase the size of fish in the population (keeping them in the lake long enough until they grow to a certain size), and to increase the catch rate (shorten the time between bites) by keeping more fish in the lake. Sometimes they have been used to protect fish until they get large enough to spawn.

For length limits to be effective there are some biological criteria that have to be met and there are some sociological things to consider.

In Lake Erie, we use the 14" length limit to protect spawning smallmouth bass and to reduce the harvest of smallmouth bass.

In Inland lakes, length limits are generally used to increase the size of fish in a lake and to increase the number of fish in the lake resulting in higher catch rates (shortening the time between bites). Used frequently for largemouth bass in inland lakes.

There are some biological requirements for a length limit to be successful:

Generally, fish must have good growth, good annual survival, and *extensive harvest of small fish*.

Sociological requirements for a length limit to be successful:

Anglers must accept it, must have an expectation that the regulation will improve fishing, and it must be enforceable.

There is a wide range of muskie length limits over the country from none to 50-inches. That is because conditions vary a lot for muskie across the country and some management philosophies differ among agencies. In some lakes, agencies rely on natural reproduction to create fisheries so they need to protect spawning fish. In Ohio, we stock annually and we do not rely on natural reproduction; therefore, we do not need to protect spawning fish. In some states muskies grow slow and live a long time; therefore, it may make sense to try to protect larger fish. In Ohio, muskies grow extremely fast and they are relatively short lived. In some states, many fish were kept in the past (ex. Kentucky), but the catch and release ethic became more accepted through time. In Ohio, anglers have a very strong catch and

release ethic and the vast majority of muskies caught are released. We don't believe that a length limit in Ohio would effectively create "trophy" fisheries or improve catch rates. Generally, length limits of 42 to 50 inches are used to try to create trophy limits. Our muskie catch data show that only 1 muskie 42 -50 inches was kept per 3,700 acres of water per year during 1996 to 2006.

The biological data tell us that a muskie length limit *would not* improve muskie fishing in Ohio and we believe that there are good ethical and sociological reasons **not** to use a muskie length limit in Ohio. Specifically, we do NOT want to:

- prevent someone from keeping their first muskie (especially a child); keeping a fish could hook that person on muskie fishing the rest of their life.
- prevent someone from keeping the largest fish they have ever caught;
- force someone to return to a lake a fish that has accidentally died when the regulation has no expected benefit.

Muskie Angler Log (MAL) as a catch reporting system—Kevin Page

The Muskie Angler Log (MAL) is the new ONLINE reporting system for reporting muskie catches to the Ohio Division of Wildlife. It is very important that anglers report their muskie fishing trips (effort) and catches to the Division of Wildlife for the future of the muskie program in Ohio. In addition to providing information to the Division of Wildlife, the MAL will be a great source of information anglers interested in tracking their success.

The Muskie Angler Log replaces the Ohio Huskie Muskie (OHMC) system of reporting catches through the submission of scale samples. The scale sample program officially started in 1965 and it has been a very successful means of providing catch reports to identify stocking success. Since its inception, we have received 47,241 muskie catches through this approach. Today, we are ready to move into a more technologically advanced system of reporting and have enough historical information to no longer need scale samples. However, we still need the core information that we received through the scale sample program: *when the fish was caught, where the fish was caught, the length of each muskie caught, and whether it was kept or released.* We WANT and NEED anglers to keep reporting this set of core information. We have been lacking one piece of information over the years that we would like to capture with this new system—*effort spent fishing for muskies.*

We wanted the MAL to be beneficial to you as muskie anglers too. We solicited input from muskie anglers from each of your clubs to help us develop the log. We re-fined the MAL based on feedback during a one-year period to come up with the product that we have today.

The MAL will be launched and ready for use on March 1, 2008.

To estimate fishing effort with this new system, we are now going to be asking you to report:

- Number of fishing trips
- Hours fished (hours trolling and hours casting)
- Number of rods used

We are asking each angler to report their personal catch rather the catch out of your boat, just as we did with the scale sample program. So if your wife, children, or friend's fish with you and catch a muskie they should report their own catches (Of course, you can help them use the MAL).

We want the MAL to be a source for all sorts of information on muskie angling in Ohio. We will have links for:

- Muskie biology
- Muskie management in Ohio
- Downloadable maps for muskie lakes some time in the future.
- Muskie stocking information
- Photo gallery
- Frequently Asked Questions (about the log)
- Contact information for the Division of Wildlife for other questions.
- Downloadable catch entry sheet—a record that you can take in the field with you and write down the information and then come back to your computer later to report the information.

The data that you report are confidential because this is your personal log. Only the angler that reports it will be able to see personal details and get summaries of their catches by lake, by bait, etc. It will only be shared with club presidents ***if you select a club affiliation.***

Statewide Catch Summaries will be a summary by lake, size of fish caught and not linked to an individual angler. This information will be available to everyone to view.

To access the MAL go to:

www.ohiodnr.com/muskielog

For angler's who do not have a computer, catches can be reported on postage-paid post cards available at the same locations where scale cards have been available.

Question: will the data be archived from one year to the next?

Answer: YES.

Question: do you expect an increase in reporting of catch data since scale samples are no longer reported?

Answer: we believe that reporting will increase for multiple reasons. Scales are no longer required. This will be a great tool for tracking fishing success including bait, conditions, etc. For most people with computers it will be easy to report your catches.

Open Forum for Clubs to discuss topics of interest to them.

Topics introduced from the floor included:

1. Club Organization—Muskie Alliance (Scott Hale).
2. Minnow Fund (Muskie Production Fund)
3. Muskie length limit

Muskie Alliance—suggestion. Last year David Cates discussed how muskie clubs in Illinois have formed an Alliance of Muskie Clubs within their state. Ohio clubs might similarly benefit by uniting to improve communication and share accomplishments. This approach might facilitate work on common projects such as the minnow fund or host state wide tournaments, or outings, and provide a stronger lobbying voice for legislation of interest to sportsmen.

The Ohio Division of Wildlife thinks that OHMC would be a good umbrella organization to develop such an alliance since it is the longest standing muskie club in Ohio and has statewide membership. We would envision the new alliance to have representatives from each of the other clubs and the organization, of course, would be up to all of the clubs.

Discussion: We want to minimize the work load. This “muskie summit” could become an annual meeting hosted by such a group or at least a venue for the group to meet since most clubs attend this event. Such an organization could open up more opportunities with tackle manufactures; boat manufactures etc. to help sponsor events. This group would be beneficial in fighting against attacks from anti-fishing groups and potential legislation that could affect muskie anglers.

Minnow Fund (Muskie Production Fund)—Rob VanGorder has been the “keeper” of the minnow fund. This past year he received \$2,300 from clubs to put towards this effort. This money was used to purchase two pieces of equipment (donated to the Division of Wildlife) to help produce muskies in hatcheries. Rob is willing to continue being the “keeper” or coordinator of this fund. Rob also submitted an application to get a grant from Muskie Inc.

This fund was originally named the “minnow fund” because the Division of Wildlife (ODW) had a bottleneck getting enough minnows to feed muskies in our hatcheries. Clubs were contributing money to this fund to purchase minnows for this purpose. This year ODW did not need the minnows but did need equipment that they could not purchase. There will most likely be additional needs for equipment to improve muskie production.

Muskie Length Limit Proposal—Joel Johnson representing MI Chapter 56 gave a presentation asking ODW to implement a muskie length limit on Caesar’s Creek Reservoir as a pilot study. They feel that the length limit is warranted because:

- (1) anglers desire larger fish and/or greater catch rates,
- (2) over harvest is occurring,
- (3) anglers are willing to comply with the regulation,
- (4) recruitment is steady, and
- (5) growth rates are good.

Division of Wildlife Response (Scott Hale):

We stand on our previous position:

- A length limit does NOT automatically result in larger or more fish.
- Over harvest is NOT occurring with the best information that we have and clearly most muskies are not kept by muskie or other anglers. Our best information is that muskies incidentally caught and kept by other anglers are minimal. A length limit will not prevent ill informed anglers from intentionally killing a muskie and releasing it dead. There is a law currently against that practice but it is very difficult to catch someone. Education may be a better approach to curtail that type of activity.
- Implementing a length limit under the wrong circumstances will provide no benefit but could cause some harm.
- The harm is sociological—
 1. we do not want to force kids to release their first muskie
 2. we do not want to force an adult to release their first muskie just because it is 36-inches or 38-inches instead of 40-inches. Keeping that first fish could turn them into life long muskie anglers.
 3. we do not want to force an angler to release a dead muskie back. Occasionally, no matter how careful you handle them, muskies die when they are caught.
 4. Sometimes length limits become targets for some anglers. If the length limit is 40-inches they will keep any legal fish they catch thinking it is OK because that fish is above the legal length limit. So it may actually encourage harvest of fish over the length limit by some anglers.
 5. The other problem is that anglers see a lake with a high length limit and they tend to believe that lake has the most muskies in it over that length limit so they all go there to fish. The result is an increase in fishing pressure, more muskies being caught, and more mortality on released fish do to increased captures and handling.

The bottom line is the Ohio Division of Wildlife does not believe a length limit will make muskie fishing any better at this time or increase fishing opportunities.

Closing Remarks:

Ray Petering—Executive Fish Administrator

The dialogue at this meeting is terrific. Joel, we may not agree with your proposal but your presentation was well done. We do care what you as a muskie group want and are interested in and we try to work with our constituent groups. But, we have to consider all of our constituents. Sometimes we have to make decisions that are not the most popular. The decisions we make are supported by science, the best information we have available, and taking into consideration all of the social considerations. Regulations are not permanent and static. At sometime in the future we may feel that a muskie length limit would be in the best interest of all of our constituents, but at this point in time we believe that it is not a regulation that would improve fishing or best serve the majority of anglers.

Just because we do not agree with a muskie length limit at this time does not mean that we view your proposal as bad. The dialogue is good. We all want the same thing—the best muskie fishing possible in Ohio.

We have to make decisions on good information. Frequently, we hear “it is not going to hurt anything and it may help” from all of our constituents—muskie anglers, bass anglers, deer hunters, turkey hunters and the rest. The problem is we do not want to set a precedent of making a decision without data to support it.

Again, we are all on the same side here and we are committed to providing the best muskie fishing possible and to work with all the muskie clubs in doing in reaching that goal.

Jim Marshall—assistant chief of the Division of Wildlife

I want to thank all participants at this meeting—the muskie anglers and the Fisheries Staff—for working together. I started out working in fisheries and I have seen a lot of improvements over the years in muskie management and fishing.

Organized muskie fishermen have created a strong ethic of catch and release among muskie anglers and that is tremendous. The voluntary compliance does more and is greater than a regulation. Education is very important.

The single most important thing I have heard discussed here today was the formation of an alliance of muskie clubs. That type of relationship makes you stronger as a group and makes you a more powerful constituent group and partner of the Division of Wildlife. I really hope that comes to fruition.

Scott Hale—wrap up.

Scott asked the group if they wanted to plan this meeting again next year. The consensus was yes.

1. A potential agenda item to discuss next year is increasing our **“Fish Ohio”** requirements for a muskie. We will discuss that in-house and bring that back for further discussion next year. We may want to involve the outdoor writers on this decision as well.
2. Perhaps further discussion on a Muskie alliance.

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING!!!