

# **How, why and when was the Northern Inland Lakes Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee formed.**

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The Northern Inland Lakes Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee was formed in the fall of 2009 as a result of efforts to keep the recreational and Tribal walleye fishery open in Mullett Lake during the 2010 season. The Inland Consent Decree was completed during 2007 and provided the recreational and Tribal fisheries an equal share of 35% (17.5% for each) of the estimated number of walleye in Mullett Lake. It has been established that harvesting up to 50% of the walleye each year that live in a lake is safe but to be more conservative there was an agreement to only allow up to 35% of the walleye population to be taken.

A survey conducted during 1998 estimated that about 14,000 walleyes were in Mullett Lake, however, a new survey by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) and Tribal crews in the spring of 2009 indicated that only 2,680 walleye were present in the lake. This very low number of walleye alarmed the MDNR Fisheries Division so a news release came out indicating that the recreational walleye fishery might have to be closed in Mullett Lake during 2010 to allow the population to recover. This alarmed many anglers, businesses, Lake Associations, Tribal representatives, and others causing the MDNR to hold a public meeting in the north to discuss possible alternatives.

I was Chair of the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee and worked closely with Dr. Kelley Smith, Fisheries Chief so I was asked to arrange a public meeting. As a member of the Hammond Bay Area Anglers Association, we set-up a meeting at the Ocqueoc Township Hall near Onaway on October 28, 2009. An overflow crowd was in attendance resulting in standing room only, so the windows were opened allowing the overflow participants to hear the discussion while standing outdoors near the windows.

Kelley Smith moderated the meeting and heard from all sides of the issue with the emphasis focusing on working toward keeping a limited walleye fishery open for both the Tribal and recreational fishers. Other MDNR biologists and Tribal representatives were present to comment. Kelley stressed that a final decision on having a walleye season in Mullett Lake for 2010 had not been made and the Natural Resources Commission would make a decision at their December meeting. He ensured that there was time available to discuss options for keeping a limited walleye fishery open. It appeared that people left the meeting feeling less anxious and that progress was being made.

It was agreed that a formal hearing on walleye fishing in Mullett Lake would take place at the Tuscarora Township Hall on November 7, 2009, to obtain additional input on potential walleye regulations during the 2010 season. This meeting was very well attended with 104 participants. Again, Fisheries Chief Kelley Smith and other MDNR biologists along with Tribal fisheries managers and biologists were present responding to questions and comments. Kelley Smith

stressed that the walleye management approach that the MDNR and Tribes were using cooperatively is very conservative compared to other states like Wisconsin so there is room to carefully continue both the recreational and Tribal fisheries during 2010. Tribal representatives indicated that their goal was same. There was then an extensive discussion with input coming from all sides of the issue.

No formal vote was taken but the majority of comments supported reducing the recreational bag limit from 5 walleye per day to 3 and extending the spring closure until May 15. Actually, there was much interest in enacting similar, more conservative rules in the other lakes in the Inland Waterway, but it was agreed that there was not enough time to obtain public input before the 2010 season. There was also much interest in continuing these productive discussions with the many stakeholders sharing ideas with MDNR and Tribal representatives. It was decided that a meeting would be held on November 23, 2009 at the Tuscarora Hall to discuss organizing an Advisory Committee similar to the Great Lakes Committees and further discuss potential recreational walleye regulations for 2010. Again, since I worked closely with Kelley Smith Chairing the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee, he asked me to Chair this upcoming Inland Advisory meeting.

The November 23 meeting was very productive. Several proposed walleye rule changes were discussed resulting in a unanimous decision to follow the idea expressed most at the November 7, 2009, hearing to reduce the walleye bag limit from 5 fish per day to 3 fish per day and not open the spring season until May 15. It was agreed that this recommendation would be presented to the Natural Resources Commission at its December meeting. The Commission accepted the proposal, and the regulations were implemented in 2010.

After completing the discussion of potential walleye regulations, a productive discussion of permanently establishing an ongoing Advisory Committee ensued. Kelley Smith indicated that a newly established Inland Lake Advisory Committee would be an excellent way of increasing communications between the vast number of stakeholders and both the MDNR and Tribal representatives. He encouraged the group to formally organize and meet on a regular basis. Each participant at the meeting enthusiastically commented and it was unanimously agreed that continuing the Committee would be very productive. There would be opportunities to have experts update the Committee on various aspects of the fishery including the food web, partnerships with the State, Tribes, other agencies and Universities, fish stocking, cormorants, research projects and other issues. These are the types of items that have been regularly discussed at the Great Lakes Advisory Committees since 1989 resulting in much cooperation between the stakeholders and the MDNR along with many other agencies, groups and institutions. I indicated that I was willing to assist in organizing and getting the Committee running but I was looking for a new Chair to take over. For some reason I have continued in the Chair role over the years. I only Chair at the pleasure of the Northern Inland Lakes Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee members so if there is interest in new leadership, please do not hesitate to make the needed changes.

The outcome of the formation of the Committee over 12 years ago has been extremely positive. A productive and cooperative relationship of the vast number of stakeholders has developed with the MDNR and Tribal representatives. The largest walleye study ever conducted

in Michigan took place in the Inland Waterway beginning quickly in 2010. During this period many other aspects of the diversified fisheries in the Inland Waterway, and Grand and Long Lakes near Alpena are being regularly discussed at the meetings. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as Chair and appreciate greatly all of the intense effort and support from everyone to make this forum a success.