Sand Lake Fisheries Management Plan 5/2/2012

Following the assessment completed in July 2011, the Fisheries Lake Management Plan for Sand Lake was revised. We took a little different approach to developing the new plan and incorporated a lot of public input along the way.

The process included a series of three meetings with DNR Fisheries staff and members of the lake association, Phil Thompson, Don Wilson, Dan Dehn, Pat Sievertson, and Dave Smith.

In the first meeting we were joined by Rich Rezanka, DNR Invasive Species Specialist, and Mike Fairbanks, DNR Conservation Officer. The focus of the first meeting was to discuss aquatic invasive species, DNR enforcement activities and general fish biology/ecology. Specific topics included predator/prey relationships, carrying capacity, lake survey techniques and tools, and lake classifications.

In the second meeting we were joined by Carl Bergquist. This meeting focused on the specific data we have on Sand Lake. We discussed the relationship between walleye and northern pike and yellow perch as well as other species. We looked at how the lake has responded to various management actions in the past.

In the third and final meeting, Jim Justeson joined us. In this meeting we essentially drafted the key elements of the new plan. Starting with a clean slate we collectively identified the primary and secondary species, stated explicit goals for the principal species and developed the operational plan. The operational plan identifies the specific activities that will take place at specific times. We also discussed the possibility of a special regulation for walleye as well as re-visiting the sunfish regulation at some point in the future.

Primary and secondary species for management are a way of identifying the most important species that anglers are interested in or they are a key species in the fish community that will be managed for with specific goals. Walleye, northern pike and yellow perch are the primary species for management while bluegill and black crappie are listed as secondary species.

The previous lake management plan had a goal of 10 walleye per gill net lift. The highest ever observed was slightly over 8. After some discussion the majority of the participants felt 9 was a more reasonable goal. The goal for walleye also includes some size specific targets that look to increase the abundance of larger, older walleye. Specific goals for northern pike, yellow perch, black crappie and bluegill were also listed.

The discussion of the operational plan started with a question; is learning the extent of natural reproduction of walleye important? The answer to this question would drive the remainder of the discussion about the operational plan. The group discussed this at length and decided that yes, it is important to understand the extent of natural reproduction. There is good evidence that natural reproduction can be substantial, at times. The past stocking history makes it difficult to separate natural production from stocking. The new plan will help clear that up with no stocking proposed in 2012 or 2013, 1.9 million walleye fry marked with oxytetracycline (OTC) in 2014 and 2015, and then no stocking in 2016 or 2017. Evaluation will consist of annual fall electrofishing for young of the year and yearling walleye and a fish population assessment in 2017.

With this plan, any walleye from the 2012 or 2013 year class has to be from natural production since there will be no stocked fish from those year classes. The fry stocked in 2014 and 2015 will be marked with OTC. This will allow us to determine if fish from these year classes were stocked or natural. The next netting assessment has been moved from a five year rotation to six years. This will allow us to look at the 2014 and 2015 year classes as two and three year olds in the 2017 assessment. If we did the netting assessment in 2016 we would be looking at one and two year old fish and we typically do not catch many one year old walleye in our nets.

There are safety nets built into this plan should we find information along the way that suggest a decline in the fishery. We will continue the annual fall electrofishing and we will rely on reports from anglers and conservation officers. If necessary, we can move up the assessment or do special sampling to collect additional data. If the additional data suggest a change in the plan, we can do that if needed.

The process used to develop this plan are somewhat unique, in fact, this is the first time we used such a collaborative process for a Lake Management Plan. It was very time consuming but very valuable. Each meeting lasted 3 to 4 hours and consisted of open dialogue and questions and answers from all of the participants.

Please feel free to contact our office if you have any questions or would like a copy of the plan. We can be reached at (218) 327-4430 or e-mail david.weitzel@state.mn.us or chris.kavanaugh@state.mn.us