

Meeting Summary
Muskie Program Summit
Bridgewater Banquet and Conference Center, Powell, OH
February 27, 2010 9:30 AM – 12:00 PM

Meeting summary prepared by Curtis Wagner (curt.wagner@dnr.state.oh.us), March 5, 2010

Attendees

- Ohio Division of Wildlife
 - Ray Petering, Executive Administrator
 - Scott Hale, Inland Fisheries Program Administrator
 - Elmer Heyob, Hatchery Program Administrator
 - Jon Denlinger, Fisheries Biology Supervisor, Inland Fisheries Research Unit
 - Tim Parrett, Fish Management Supervisor, District 4 (Athens)
 - Kevin Page, Fisheries Biologist, Inland Fisheries Research Unit
 - Curtis Wagner, Fisheries Biologist, District 3 (Akron)
- Muskie Club Representatives
 - Fred Lederer, Ohio Huskie Muskie Club
 - Aaron Kirkingburg, Ohio Huskie Muskie Club
 - Chris DePaola, Muskies Inc. #23 (Cleveland)
 - Don Clowes, Muskies Inc. #23 (Cleveland/Shenango River Watchers)
 - Rob VanGorder, Muskies Inc. #41 (Central Ohio)
 - John Oldfield, Muskies Inc. #41 (Central Ohio)
 - Jim Moore, Muskies Inc. #9 (West Virginia)
 - Gordon Seldon, Muskies Inc. #19 (Akron/Canton)
 - Tom Welter, Muskies Inc. #45 (Kentucky)
 - Scott Shampton, Muskies Inc. #56 (SOMA, Southwest Ohio)
 - George Weber, Muskies Inc. #56 (SOMA, Southwest Ohio)
 - Cliff Honeycutt, Muskies Inc. #41 (Central Ohio)

Meeting Objectives

To provide an opportunity for a meet-and-greet among club officers and Division of Wildlife fisheries staff, to provide updates on the muskie program, and to discuss other items as interest and time allows in an open forum.

Overview and Introductions – Scott Hale, Inland Fisheries Program Administrator

The meeting began with a round of introductions from club members and the Division of Wildlife attendees. Club members shared their opinions on the 2009 muskie fishing season. Club members were asked if they had additional topics that they wanted written on the open forum discussion list, in addition to those already listed on the agenda. Chris D. added Lake Erie, John O. added communication with bass clubs, and Jim M. added the Ohio River. Scott introduced Ray Petering.

Welcome – Ray Petering, Executive Administrator for Fisheries Management & Research

Ray welcomed the group and informed attendees of the 'good', 'bad', and the 'ugly'. Starting with the 'ugly', Ray discussed the recent documented expansion of 'ugly' Asian carp (bighead, black, and silver) species. These species have been documented to out-compete native filter feeders in the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and they have been moving up the Illinois River and into the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal. Existing electrical barriers and recent rotenone (fish poisoning) treatments within the canal near Chicago seem to be having limited effects in terms of stopping their invasion into Lake Michigan. Once in Lake Michigan, these fish have the potential to disperse throughout all of the Great Lakes, including Lake Erie, which incidentally, appears to have the most suitable environmental characteristics for these species to thrive. Ray discussed the tough political position

Ohio and the other Great Lakes states are in as they try to work with Illinois and the United States Government to reach feasible, practical, and effective means to eliminate or mitigate the potential effects of these species within the Great Lakes. Arguably the most effective means of stopping their spread would be to land lock the current waterway connection between the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal and Lake Michigan. Ray said that the Ohio political body is in agreement with this option but that the momentum of the federal government is continue to operate the canal while seeking operational plans eliminate or reduce the spread and if necessary to mitigate the effects of their canal passage.

Ray followed up the 'ugly' with the 'bad.' The overall State of Ohio budget is still in 'bad' shape. Across the Department, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) is still going through tough times. One recent example is the elimination of the ODNR Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, whose programs have been transferred to other existing ODNR Divisions. However, the Division of Wildlife, which relies primarily on user-fees, is weathering the storm and will come out alright. Although the Division of Wildlife does not receive any general revenue funds, state restrictions on purchasing, travel, and workdays still apply to Division employees. At this point, Division programs are still secure, fishing license sales are up, and the muskie program is safe and in good shape.

Ray saved the 'good' for last! The attendees, and sportsman across the state, were congratulated for their vocal and visible opposition to Ohio Senate Bill 225 and Ohio House Bill 410. These bills threatened the ability of the Ohio Division of Wildlife to effectively regulate and enforce domestic/fenced deer endeavors and subsequently threatened the health and quality of our wild deer herd. Thanks in large part to sportsmen in Ohio via phone calls, letters, emails, and the 'orange hat brigade,' these bills were killed. Even further, a substitute HB410 is being drafted to clarify the roles of the Ohio Division of Wildlife and the Ohio Department of Agriculture as they pertain to these deer issues. Lastly, Ray stressed the importance of summit meetings, such as this one, and highlighted that these types of interactions are a proven and effective model of the relationships between the Ohio Division of Wildlife and sportsmen clubs. Ray encouraged all clubs to stress the importance of these relationships to their younger members and officers and pledged to foster this model in younger fisheries staff.

Production/Stocking Update – Elmer Heyob, Hatchery Program Administrator

Elmer presented overviews of the 2009 stocking, capital improvements at Kincaid State Fish Hatchery, and VHS treatment updates. A total of 19,563 advanced fingerling muskie (9-12 inches long) were stocked in our 9 program lakes in 2009. Cooler than average August temperatures allowed for earlier stocking dates than usual in some lakes, giving the fingerlings the opportunity to forage on the abundant shad populations for a longer time before winter, hopefully resulting in increased first-year growth. Elmer discussed the current production capacity and the production goal of 19,600 advanced fingerlings to be distributed at approximately 1 fish per acre across the 9 program lakes. In the event of a surplus exceeding 500 advanced fingerlings, the Division of Wildlife will stock the surplus in Pymatuning Lake.

Muskie are reared at two state hatcheries, London and Kincaid State Fish Hatcheries. London has 10 acres of production ponds, 10 raceways, and runs off of well water. Kincaid has 24 acres of production ponds, 10 raceways, and runs primarily off of spring water. Elmer also discussed what is reared at the other state fish hatcheries. Elmer explained how muskellunge are started on common carp fry (the Division started rearing their own brood carp beginning as fry in 2008) and are quickly switched to fathead minnows of appropriate and increasing size. If muskellunge fingerlings do not get the exact size they need at any given stage, they will quickly become cannibalistic. Consequently, having ample numbers of the appropriate size minnows is critically important. Elmer calculated that raising the target production number of advanced fingerling muskellunge requires 20,000 pounds of minnows each year! As Rob discussed later in the meeting, Elmer mentioned that the Division is in need of more efficient equipment (specialized tanks) to successfully transport large quantities of minnows from one state hatchery to another.

Elmer discussed a couple capital improvement projects at Kincaid hatchery. First, he mentioned the new well may be able to couple with the spring and pond water to obtain varying and precise desired water temperatures, which helps to maintain optimum growth. Secondly, he showed pictures of the old building that housed the indoor raceways and discussed the poor state of condition it was in. The Division contracted to have the indoor raceways re-surfaced, re-painted, and temporarily covered so the old building could be demolished and the new one is currently under construction. This new building is larger, more efficient for operations, houses a mixing tank for the spring, pond and (newly available) well water, and is equipped with a much more efficient oxygen/air stone supply system.

Lastly, Elmer gave a brief update regarding VHSV concerns. Research, in collaboration with the Ohio State University, has established a successful iodine treatment for muskie (and other species like walleye and saugeye) eggs to prohibit the transmission of the VHSV virus. This success will likely allow the Division to again obtain additional muskie eggs from Kentucky's Minor E. Clark Hatchery at Cave Run Lake, as has been done in the past to supplement those planned to be taken from Salt Fork Lake during 2010 spawning operations.

In closing, Elmer thanked the clubs for contributing to the minnow fund and Rob VanGorder for coordinating this effort. Although the fund is called the minnow fund because it was originally established to buy minnows (the most expensive part of muskie production), it has proven invaluable in providing the hatcheries with equipment directly purchased by the clubs. The Division greatly appreciates these contributions given the current economic climate and existing constraints on purchasing equipment vital to producing muskie. Any clubs interested in touring Kincaid, London, or any state fish hatchery can call the hatchery during regular business hours to schedule a club tour.

2009 Muskie Catch Update – Scott Hale, Inland Fisheries Program Administrator

Scott reviewed some 2009 catch highlights, the development of East Fork Lake's muskellunge fishery, and some uses of and reminders about the Muskie Angler Log (MAL). The 2000-2009 10-year average of muskie catches reported (via scale envelopes and MAL) is 1,972 muskies/year. During 2009, approximately 2800 muskies were reported! Over this same period, the reported release rate for 'huskie' muskies, those 42 inches or longer, has steadily increased from about 85% in 2000 to nearly 97% in 2009. In 2009, the top three lakes with the most reported huskies caught were Leesville, West Branch, and Alum Creek. Alum Creek reported an additional 550 muskies (of all sizes) more than reported during 2008! Elmer and Rob suggested that this trend was, in part, due to the unusual event of sustained good water clarity during the spring of 2009.

Scott gave some background on East Fork Lake (1,971 acres), stating that East Fork was first stocked with muskies in 2008 and again in 2009 with approximately one advanced fingerling per acre. Based on the fishery development rate in other program lakes, it is expected that East Fork will start regularly producing 30-36" muskies during the 2011 season and give up its first huskie during 2013. The first MAL report from East Fork was a 20" fish on June 21, 2009.

Scott Hale gave a demonstration of the use of the MAL to compare two very avid anglers on Alum Creek (Elmer and Rob). Both report all of their trips (both catches and days they caught no fish). Scott demonstrated how the MAL can be used to calculate total fishing effort (hours), number of days fished, total fish caught, fish caught per hour, hours fished per muskie caught, average fish caught per day, average length of all caught muskies, and the largest fish caught. In case you are interested, Elmer 'won' largest fish (48") and catch rate (0.22 fish per hour); however, Rob clinched the bigger average size (35.3")! This demonstration was used to both point out the importance of entering both your successful and non-successful trips and also to highlight the quality catch rates of Ohio's muskie waters compared with other known fisheries, such as the St. Lawrence River, NY.

Lastly, Scott addressed a few features and issues regarding the MAL. First, if you have forgotten your password, please don't create a new user ID; instead, there is now a link on the sign-in page that reads, "Forgot your password?" – click this link and your password will be emailed to you. Scott

also reminded attendees to carefully enter 'out-of-state' trips by selecting the proper location and walked through an example. Lastly, clubs were reminded that both the reporting of trips when fish were not caught and the total hours fished on those days and the days when fish were caught can be important if rates of catches (that is, how many hours it takes to catch a fish, on average) are to be calculated.

Break – Tournament Scheduling

Scott Hale suggested to the attendees that during the break, tournament representatives from each club place their 2011 outing/tournament dates on a pre-dated dry-erase calendar, thereby allowing for greater communication and planning among clubs. This idea was brought up during the Ohio Huskie Muskie Club's business meeting during March 2009. Most club representatives expressed the point-of-view that they don't have dates set-in-stone that far out yet. This exercise wasn't practical/feasible at this meeting, but clubs and the Division may continue to seek a way to facilitate planning and communication among clubs in the future. The idea of using an online scheduling/calendar tool was also brought up.

Open Forum: Group Discussion – Moderator: Elmer Heyob, Hatchery Program Administrator

Topics included a minnow fund update, youth opportunities and volunteer programs, Lake Erie muskellunge, communication with bass clubs, and Ohio River muskellunge.

Ohio Statewide Minnow Fund

Rob VanGorder, the Minnow Fund Coordinator, gave a presentation about the Ohio Statewide Minnow Fund. For many years, clubs have bought or provided equipment to the state hatcheries, although efforts were limited to what any one club could do. Consequently, the idea of forming a unified front for consolidating donations among clubs was discussed at the 2006 and 2007 Muskie Program Summits. Originally, the idea was that raised funds would go towards the purchasing of minnows for the muskellunge program; however, the Division of Wildlife recently has been able to entirely or mostly rear their own forage for muskellunge production and the target for the Minnow Fund has shifted towards growing this forage production capability and for other needed equipment. In 2008, five clubs raised \$8,316 and purchased four paddlewheel aerators, a minnow seine, and 733 lbs of fathead minnows. Further, in 2009, eight clubs provided \$8,697 of equipment including two fish weighing scales, four carp spawning tanks, a Jon boat, a minnow seine, and an air-lift grid system with blowers.

Each year, the Division of Wildlife provides the Minnow Fund Coordinator with a "wish list" including prioritization of needs and clubs then fundraise and pledge a dollar amount towards the Minnow Fund. Only once the needed funds are pledged does the Fund Coordinator request funds from the respective clubs to purchase equipment. Rob stressed that there is no bank account or overhead costs for the Minnow Fund and that there is 100% pass-through of donations directly to support of the hatcheries. 2010 'wish list' items include an aluminum truck-mounted minnow tank, two fish weighing scales, and a 2" pump and 3000 PSI pressure washer for the Kincaid State Fish Hatchery. A Hugh C. Becker Grant (Muskie, Inc.) application is pending for the purchase of the \$7,675 minnow hauling tank. With the grant, the fundraising goal for 2010 would be \$6,583. Without the grant, the goal is \$14,258.

Rob expressed thanks to all who have support this program over the past two years and urged club representatives to reach out to their clubs and other organizations to continue to support this important program. Rob can be reached at 740-225-1152 or rcv@kokosing.biz

Youth Opportunities and Volunteer Programs

Elmer Heyob first thanked the clubs for their participation and continuation of the Ohio Statewide Minnow Fund. He stressed that equipment provided via the Minnow Fund is much appreciated and

substantially helps the Division; however, he also stated that he wouldn't want to see participation with the Minnow Fund hinder or prevent clubs from also being able to do their own programs, specifically fishing outreach and youth programs. Elmer urged clubs to continue to consider ways that they can expose youth and other groups (veterans, disabled, etc...) to fishing, which doesn't necessarily have to muskie fishing either. Elmer mentioned Step Outside grants (contact the Division of Wildlife for more information), among others, for aiding in organizing and conducting events. Aaron Kirkingburg mentioned that he had contacts with a Sandusky Veteran's Home and also Boy Scout contacts that he could provide if a club was interested in working with Scout camps to host a fishing program for Veterans or other groups. Contact Elmer or Aaron for more information if your club is interested in pursuing these, or other, ideas.

Lake Erie Muskellunge

Chris DePaola stated that Ray Petering covered his Lake Erie concern (Asian carp) during his Welcome remarks. John Oldfield followed up asking about any information anyone had about muskellunge in Lake Erie tributaries. The Grand River was briefly mentioned (above Harpersfield Dam) and Fred Lederer said to talk to him about information on some northwest Ohio Lake Erie tributary muskies.

Communication with Other Angling (specifically bass) Clubs

John Oldfield expressed concern with ramp and lake crowding, unsportsmanlike conduct, and killing muskies by bass club members/tournaments, specifically at Alum Creek Reservoir. Scott Hale responded that he has a meeting set discuss potential bass/muskie issues with representatives of two bass circuits that regularly fish Alum Creek. Scott said that the Division will urge all clubs, tournament circuits, and anglers to exhibit good sportsmanship. Further, Scott said that he will explain the muskie program to the bass organizations and asks both bass and muskie anglers not to exaggerate reports of bass anglers slitting muskie throats and to avoid allowing these reports to get blown out of proportion. If an angler witnesses unlawful harvest of muskies, they are asked to immediately call the county Wildlife Office listed in the Ohio Fishing Regulations and ask for fish management personnel. In addition, providing Wildlife Officers with boat OH numbers and/or vehicle license plate numbers goes a long way towards helping track down a violation.

John also asked if anything can be done to limit the number of bass tournaments on muskie lakes, specifically Alum Creek. Scott and Ray both indicated that the Division of Wildlife tries not to limit recreational opportunities, but instead seeks to continually work with and educate organized fishing events regarding optimal fish-handling and live-release strategies, good sportsmanship and boating ethics, etc. John stressed that big bass boats at big tournaments creates an unsafe boating environment at Alum Creek. Aaron Kirkingburg testified that making and maintaining good relationships with bass club members goes a long ways to understanding both parties fishing interests and stresses that all parties keep in mind that conservation is a key mutual goal, each with their own individual fishing interests.

Ohio River Muskellunge

Jim Moore stated that he sees potential for developing and popularizing the Ohio River muskellunge fishery and asked what the Division of Wildlife knows about or does with these populations. Elmer responded that although we occasionally see muskellunge while doing other standardized surveys (sander electrofishing, black bass electrofishing, angler creel surveys), at this point we don't have the manpower to justify a dedicated survey program for Ohio River muskellunge. Jim mentioned that WV DNR PIT tags muskies from a few populations and anglers have readers on-board to report data back to the WV DNR. Further, that WV DNR has tagged lots of muskies in Fishing Creek and other creeks. A brief discussion of marking and tagging muskies ensued.

Other Topics

Aaron Kirkingburg suggested the idea of a calendar tool within the Muskie Angler Log to facilitate event, meeting, and outing planning among clubs. Scott responded that this was a good idea and that the Division is about two years out from a schedule upgrade/editing of the programming software underlying the MAL. Interested parties and the Division should continue to develop this idea in anticipation of potentially being able to add features during the upgrade period. It was also suggested by an attendee that other angler groups (such as bass clubs or other fishing clubs) could also reference or enter their events in such online tool.

Jim Moore pointed out, in closing, how fortunate Ohio anglers have it in regards to the Ohio muskie program. Jim said all you have to do is look at programs in other states to realize how great of a program and muskie waters we have here in Ohio.

Meeting Wrap-up – Ray Petering, Executive Administrator, Fisheries Management & Research

Ray Petering provided closing remarks, again thanking clubs and Rob for their participation and the continuation of the Ohio Statewide Minnow Fund. Ray stressed that “we (Division of Wildlife) work for you guys” and consequently need to know your expectations, successes, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, etc. Ray said that he is continually impressed with the support of anglers in Columbus when relevant governmental issues arise. In closing, Ray insisted that this model (clubs organizing and meeting with and working with the Division of Wildlife, works and urged all parties to keep pressing on and maintaining this line of open communication maintain and improve fishing in Ohio. He closed by reminding anglers that our doors are always open for discussion and wished everyone good fishing in 2010.