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The great northern pike debate

DOUG SMITH, Star Tribune

Two controversial bills at the Legislature would limit the number of lakes where the Department of Natural Resources could impose special northern pike restrictions intended to boost the average size of those fish. The DNR now has around 115 waters with length-based northern regulations. A House bill would cap the number at 60, a Senate bill at 90. A House-Senate conference committee will resolve the differences. While northern spearmen are pushing for the bills, the DNR and some anglers and groups are adamantly opposed. In a Q&A below, Dirk Peterson, DNR fisheries chief, explains the agency's position.

Q What is the intent of the northern regulations?

A We've used protected slot limits to improve the average size of northern pike in a lake. The typical regulation is a 24- to 36-inch protected slot. After World War II, we watched the decline of northern pike right up through the 1980s, and we worked with angling groups across the state to try to improve the quality of many species, including northern pike.

Q Are you trying to make these 115 waters trophy northern lakes, or just trying to increase the chance of anglers catching a larger northern?

A We're trying to increase the chance of catching a larger northern.

Q Will the results reduce the number of hammer-handle northers or other smaller fish?

A A lake can hold only so many pounds of northern pike. It can be a lot of small fish or a fewer number of large fish or a mix in between. If we increase the number of larger fish, the number of smaller fish should decline.

Q How did we get to where we are today, with 115 waters with special northern regulations?

A This has been at least 20 years in the making. At our first "roundtable" meeting with citizens in 1990, we

pledged to create quality angling opportunities through individual lakes management, with a combination of stocking and regulations. In the 1990s, we experimented with different northern regulations. We refined the regulations and applied them in the early 2000s. Between 2006 and 2008, we drafted a long-range plan for muskies and northerns. We had six public workshops, two fisheries roundtables and a broad public-review process. We adopted the plan in 2008. In it, we said we would limit the number of waters with special northern regulations to 125. We're about at that level now and don't intend to add any more lakes.

Q These restrictions were imposed with support of angling and lake associations?

A That's correct.

Q What evidence do you have that the regulations work?

A We've done evaluations on a number of lakes. At Melissa Lake in Becker County near Detroit Lakes, the percentage of northerns over 24 inches and over 30 inches has more than doubled. A study last year of 23 lakes showed the regulations were making a difference.

Q Why don't the regulations work on every lake?

A Sometimes there are mitigating factors, like forage or the growth potential for fish.

Q Do the northern regulations impact other species?

A We don't have the science to identify the causal relationships. But we know if you have a lot of small fish, it's more difficult for walleye fingerling stocking to be successful. So by shifting the size structure of northerns, walleye stocking could potentially be more successful.

Q Spearmen argue that putting a slot limit on a lake amounts to a spearing ban because spearmen won't go on the lakes, fearing they'll spear an illegal northern.

A We're sympathetic to their concerns, but we're charged with providing a variety of angling opportunities. We have 3,351 lakes with northerns in them. We've only got about 115 waters with slot limits. The opportunities they have for spearing are significant. And on the lakes with a protected slot, they still can spear smaller or larger fish.

Q Spearmen also argue the DNR told them years ago that it would only put restrictions on 60 or so lakes.

A There's no public record of that sort of statement.

Q Rep. Tom Hackbarth of Cedar, one of the bills' authors, contends the DNR simply is anti-spearing.

A No, the department isn't anti-spearing. Spearing is part of the heritage of Minnesota fishing. One hundred and fifteen waters [with restrictions] out of over 3,000 seems to be a modest number.

Q Hackbarth also doesn't believe the DNR when it says the regulations work.

A We're very comfortable with the science. It's peer-reviewed scientific literature, the gold standard.

Q How many spearmen and how many anglers are in the state?

A We have about 14,000 to 15,000 licensed spearmen, and we have about 1.5 million anglers, including nonresidents.

Q If this legislation passes, the DNR will have to remove the special northern regulations on 25 to 55 lakes. How will the agency determine which lakes to choose?

A There is no fair or reasonable way to do this. It would be extremely difficult.

Doug Smith • dsmith@startribune.com