



Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Section of Fisheries Management

Aitkin Area Fisheries Office
1200 Minnesota Avenue South
Aitkin, MN 56431

October 16, 2012

Dear Mille Lacs Input Group Members,

I hope you all have enjoyed some of the good fishing we had on Mille Lacs this past summer and winter! Before the very hot weather set in, I too was able to get out a few times with my son and caught some very nice fish.

As you are likely aware, the Aitkin Area Fisheries Office recently completed its fall survey of Mille Lacs. We were disappointed to find the overall abundance of walleye, as measured by gillnets, had dropped to 4.8 fish/net when compared to 9.7 fish/net last year. This is lower than we expected to see in the nets and is the lowest catch rate since 1972. Even the offshore nets were lower (9.8/net), which is where the highest catches are typically recorded. We also observed that the walleye were in poorer condition than what is typically seen, especially for the larger fish. Also, from electrofishing assessment the survival of one year old fish appeared to be relatively low, which is similar to what we observed in 2002 and 2007. The one bit of good news is that walleye reproduction last spring, once again, appeared to be very good based on our electrofishing surveys.

There was a more mixed story regarding other species that were sampled. Northern pike numbers dropped as well in both the standard nets and the special pike nets. However, tullibee numbers in the offshore nets were much higher than expected, especially given the high summer water temperatures and the observed summer kill. Smallmouth numbers were similar to last year, while yellow perch numbers were lower.

Additionally, it looks like the walleye tally for state anglers this season will be around 320,000 pounds total, and for the bands about 80,000 pounds, which combined was well under our estimated safe harvest level of 500,000 pounds.

Mille Lacs, as well as other lakes, are complex systems. Currently, adding to the complexity are invasive species, changes in bass and panfish populations, improved water clarity, and other factors that may influence our understanding of the lake's fish community. All of these concerns will be factored in as we combine all sources of information about the lake to determine the next safe harvest level and management alternatives. As you already know we

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are also in active discussions with the Chippewa Bands to insure we are doing the best job possible to manage for a healthy Mille Lacs.

What does all this mean for the Mille Lacs fishery? At this time, I'm not entirely sure, but I am very concerned about the lower walleye catches. My staff, other biologists, and I are working to understand the status of the walleye fishery using the best information and analytical tools available. We are also planning to conduct another tagging study to estimate population size in the spring of 2013, as a check for our models and assessments. This information will help us better understand why net catches appear to be dropping and what our best management options may be to insure Mille Lacs remains a world class fishery.

I've attached some charts from our fall assessment for your information and I will provide more later this fall as our compilations of the data are completed. An early winter meeting with the Mille Lacs Public Input Group may be desirable to discuss these results, and I would appreciate your feedback in this regard.

Please feel free to give me a call if you have questions, as I'm sure many of you do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Bruesewitz', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rick Bruesewitz
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Rick.Bruesewitz@state.mn.us

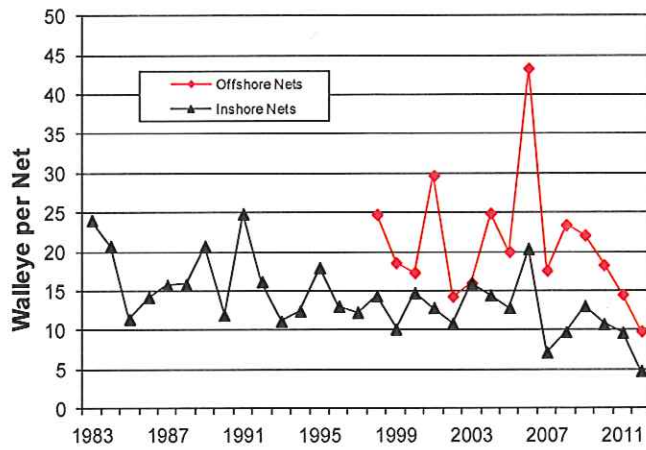


Figure 1. Historical walleye net catches at Mille Lacs Lake, 1983-2012.

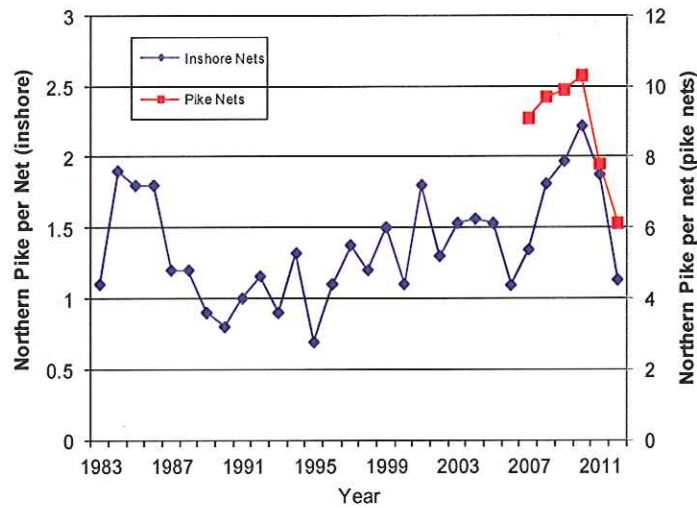


Figure 2. Historical northern pike catches at Mille Lacs Lake, 1983-2012.

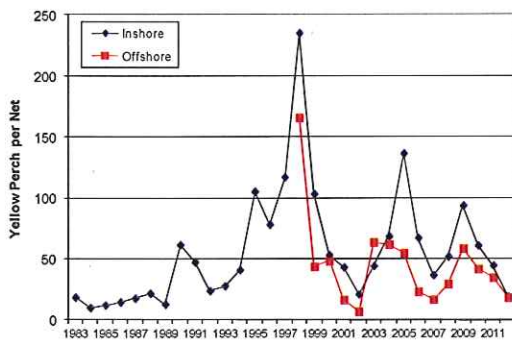


Figure 3. Historical yellow perch catches at Mille Lacs Lake, 1983-2012.

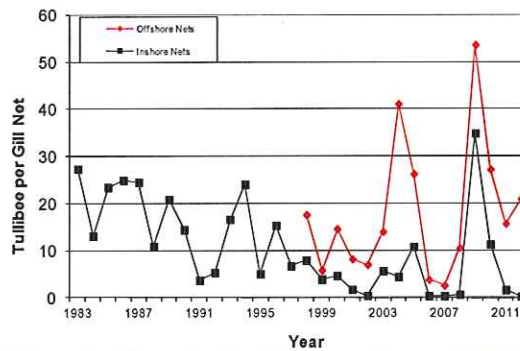


Figure 4. Historical tullibee catches at Mille Lacs, 1983-2012.

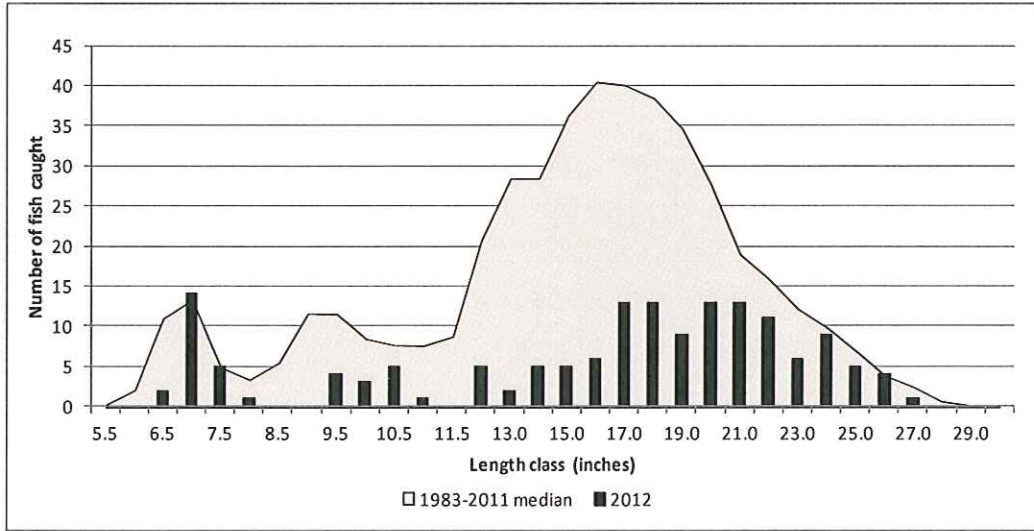


Figure 5. Length distribution of walleye from standard assessment gill nets.

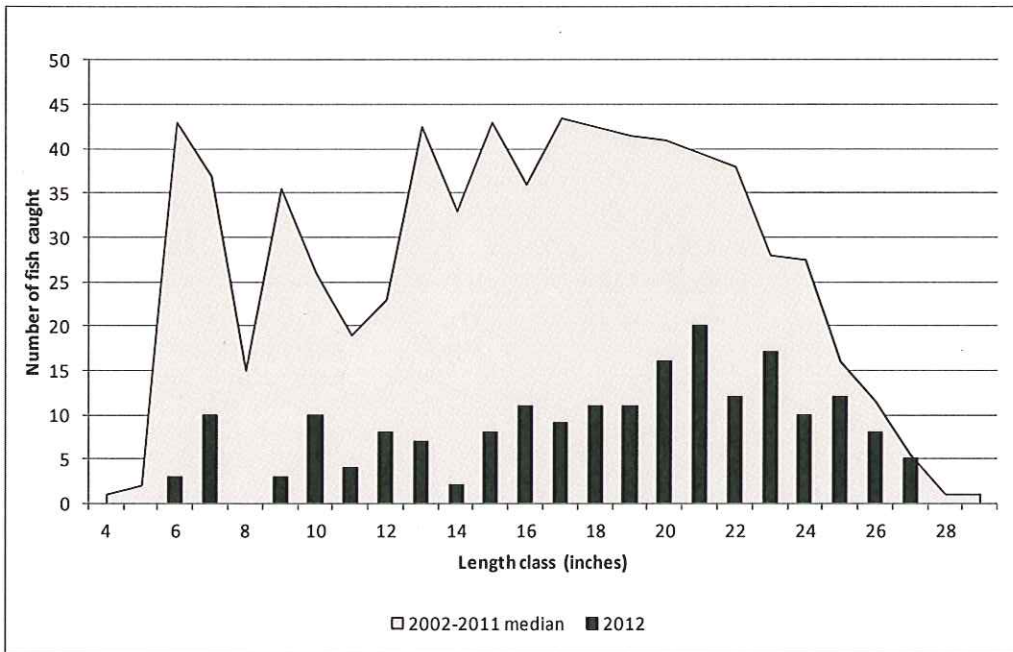


Figure 6. Length distribution of walleye from offshore assessment gill nets.