

Greetings Big Sandy Lake Friends!

I hope all had a great holiday and that we all have had just the right amount of snow fall in your yards. Not too much, but not too little. If I had my way it would be about a foot total (in 2 inch snow falls), just enough to cover the septic system. I suspect a few snowmobilers would appreciate a bit more, though.

In any event, I'm writing you to discuss some goings on we've had recently. In the last year we put a lot of time into gathering some more field data so that I could answer a few nagging questions I've had regarding the Big Sandy walleye population. In general, I'm concerned. In evaluating all of the information we have in our files, as well as the new information we collected this past year, my conclusion is that Big Sandy is over-fished. Specifically it's the walleye ages 4, 5, and 6 year old that seem to be hit pretty hard just about every year. That makes sense too, since those fish typically range from about 12 to 18 inches long – the eaters! Unfortunately not very many of them are actually making it thru to old age. For example if you start with 100 age 4 fish, by the time they get to age 6 there are roughly only 9 fish remaining – and even fewer into the older ages. I think you too have probably seen this in your catches – lots of fish around 10-12 inches, just not many fish over the 14 inch mark. This condition is leaving the spawning stock in pretty tough shape too, and I believe we've seen some poor year classes because of it. In addition, another key population indicator I looked at was the age diversity of the spawners. Basically, the more age classes that are spawning, the better the condition of the stock. The spawner age diversity at Big Sandy has been decreasing steadily, to the point that it too suggests a condition of over-fishing. Big Sandy has great potential to regularly produce good walleye year classes, but in recent years it hasn't done that so well. We've lived for a long time without any extra regulation at Big Sandy, but considering that it is probably the hardest hit walleye fishery in the county (including Mille Lacs before or after Treaty harvest), I think it is about time to make a change.

The change I'm proposing at this time is for an experimental regulation that has both a minimum size (14 inches) and a large protected slot (18-26 inches) – we refer to this as a 14-18 inch harvest slot limit, with one allowed over 26 inches. Under this regulation, anglers could keep walleye from 14-18 inches, with one trophy allowed over 26 inches. The objectives are essentially to increase the number of fish surviving to age 6 and older (especially the females), improve the angler catch of fish 14-18 inches, and to increase the abundance and age diversity of the female spawning stock (age diversity is very important because if you rely only on one year class to keep producing fry, eventually that year class will be gone, or so reduced that it cannot replenish the fishery). In addition, I have written into the proposal an early review period when we could decide if it might be appropriate to loosen things up a bit once spawning stock is built back up.

I'm sure some of you are thinking "So why not stock like we used to do?" I've put a lot of time into trying to determine if that would be a good idea or not. The bottom line is that for all of the ways I can look at the data, the old fry stockings just did not contribute anything substantial to the fishery. I also looked at other contributing factors such as water levels and the changing of water level in the spring, and neither of those factors affected the population as much as simply the number of spawners. If, however, I believe that the spawning stock alone is inadequate to replenish the lake, I would certainly entertain another fry stocking program; however, I don't believe we're there yet. I do believe that within a few years we can have the spawner population built back up to a reasonable level with the proposed regulation. This would result in the annual potential to produce a decent year class of walleye. It's by no means a guarantee for a year class, but more like keeping a principle in your bank account. When rates (spawning conditions) are down, you're not going to produce much for interest (year classes), but when they do finally pop up, you'll be in good shape. If you continually draw out of the principle (spawning stock), then when rates do finally go up, you still don't get what you could have if you hadn't touched the principle. So... we need to keep a decent principle in our lake account!

In addition to walleye, I have also proposed a 5 fish limit for bluegill in Aitkin Lake and the entire Big Sandy system. The quality you have now will disappear as the fishery becomes more and more popular, and gets more and more publicity (and it will get the publicity via internet, word of mouth, newspaper columns, etc). I believe the 5 fish bag will have a good chance to keep this fishery as special as it is now. I know of no other lakes in the area (and possibly the entire Region) that produces fish the sizes that do Aitkin and Sandy Lakes, but you may want to keep that under your collective hats!

These draft regulation proposals are currently being reviewed internally in the DNR. If approved, then they would be opened up for public review, with a meeting sometime late next summer or early fall. If all goes well the regulations would be implemented opener 2011. This would be pretty good timing since it appears the 2008 year class is pretty decent. This would be the first year class to enter the fishery with the protection of the regulations.

I have received the results of your survey, and appreciated all the comments. I also know many of you would not be in favor of added regulations, but I truly believe it will be the best thing for the resource. While the formal public review would take place next summer, I'd be happy to hear from your association prior to that.

Take care, and may your rattle reels sound true, and the flags on your tip-ups rise high!

Rick Bruesewitz

Aitkin Area DNR Fisheries Supervisor

Memo from President Jim Krezowski

This subject has been discussed by the BSLA Board and DNR Fisheries for a number of years. The previous Fisheries Supervisor seemed to have little interest in the subject, so when Rick Bruesewitz replaced him after he retired we asked Rick if he would study it so an informed decision could be made. The above article is the result of his study over the last two years. As you can see, he is making a proposal to MN DNR Fisheries, but is leaving the door open for input from us. Now is the time for you to voice your opinion! Please identify yourself, be as factual as you can, and express an objective opinion pro or con. You may contact us by:

- 1) E-mail to our website
- 2) Phone call to a board member
- 3) Letter sent to BSLA, PO Box 21, McGregor, MN 55760

We will compile what we receive by early March and include it in the April newsletter. If we speak loudly as an organization it is much more effective than as individuals; a good reason for you to become a BSLA member!