**LAKE CHAMPLAIN FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT COOPERATIVE**

**Policy Committee Meeting (Virtual Meeting via Teams)**

**July 14, 2021, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.**

**Attendees:**

**NYSDEC**: Rob Fiorentino, Steve Hurst, Tony Wilkinson, Nicole Balk (current Technical Committee chair)

**VTFWD:** Eric Palmer, Louis Porter, Lee Simard, Bernie Pientka, Margaret Murphy, Kevin Kelsey, Shawn Good, Dylan Sickles, Mark Scott (joined at 10:35)

**USFWS**: Wendi Weber, Andrew Milliken, Jonah Withers, Kurt Heim, Bill Ardren, Brad Young, Chris Smith, Lowell Whitney

**UVM:** Ellen Marsden (jointed later 9:50)

**Quebec**: none

**LCBP**: Eric Howe

**Congressional staff:** Tom Berry (Leahy), Ahren von Schnell (Stefanik)

**USDA:** David Allanben

Meeting Convened at 9:00 am**.** Minutes taken by Nicole Balk, NYSDEC

1. **Introductions – Milliken**

Review/Approval of Minutes from 2020 Policy Committee Meeting

* Porter moved to approve; Weber seconded
* No discussion
* **Approved – unanimous [9:15]**

**2. Agency Announcements and Budget Updates**

* NYSDEC: Tony Wilkinson.
  + Many challenges were faced over the past year with Covid-19.
  + Last year’s budget was difficult, with a 50% cut in NPS spending. There was a hiring freeze, which is now being lifted.
  + Hatcheries: Completed 100% of stocking efforts across the state, mostly on time. Hatchery staffing is down by about 20% due to the hiring freeze. New York still has major challenges ahead with infrastructure improvements needed at the hatcheries.
  + Steve Hurst & Region 5 moved forward with LC creel survey
  + The Trout Stream Management Plan was completed this year, with the new regulations adopted this spring.
  + The new 10-year Deer Management Plan was also adopted this year
  + Online hunter education was very successful; we will continue to offer this online
  + 2020 was a good year despite the challenges. Our staff was very productive; we hope to build on that this year.
  + New York will be losing a lot of retirees in the next few years and they are not expected to all be replaced right away.
* VFWD: Louis Porter
  + VT is returning to the office and the field now.
  + The budget is in decent shape thanks to federal Covid-19 funding
  + He was impressed by staff and the work they completed during the pandemic
* USFWS: Wendi Weber, Lowell Whitney
  + Wendi: Henry Bouchard passed away recently. Shane Hanlon will take his place.
  + Positions filled: Secretary of the Interior, Debra Holland
    - New assistant secretary of parks:
  + Budget: released in early June. $48M increase for F&W from the previous year.
  + Administrative priorities
    - Covid-10
    - Climate change
    - America the Beautiful campaign - getting started now
    - Infrastructure needs, ongoing
  + Regional priorities
    - Supporting work force
    - Connecting people to nature
    - Conservation – 1. work on at-risk species (diadromous fish). 2. Urban program.
* LCBP – recently published the latest SOL Report. Available on their website or via the link the Teams Chat; also shared via email

**3. 2020 FTC Annual Report summary and Updates**

Nicole Balk (NYSDEC) – intro and highlights - PowerPoint [9:34-9:40]

Atlantic salmon - Bill Ardren (USFWS) - PowerPoint

* A PBT tagging program has been established at WRNFH [for the 2020-2024 year classes]
  + There are 18 separate groups
    - 10 groups are being reared at DD Eisenhower NFH
    - 8 groups were sent to the ADK Hatchery and were released as unfed fry into 3 rivers in spring of 2021
  + Will be expanding the program to Lake Ontario with an egg take this fall. Smolts will be stocked in spring of 2023
* Boquet River: 2020 was the 1st year of adult outplanting on the North Branch
  + Outplanted 197 adult broodstock
  + Previous findings had low densities of smolts, and they were only found in a few areas.
  + Currently finding lots of fry in the North Branch with backpack electrofishing surveys
  + As a result of these findings, USFWS will continue adult outplanting in fall 2021.
  + Redds: 182 redds were observed in the Boquet River in 2020 (up from just 4 in 2019) - likely due to good flows.
    - Most (126) redds were found below the cascade at Willsboro.
    - Telemetry shows limited passage of the cascades.
    - 56 redds in the North Branch - likely from outplanted broodstock used to jumpstart recovery.
  + Salmon not passing the cascade at Willsboro – 1 of 30 made it over (3%).
    - 2020 was a low flow year
    - Currently exploring opportunities to improve passage (new design for baffles)
    - Low thiamine levels could be a contributing factor
* Winooski River:
  + FERC process is working well in the Winooski River
  + Adult returns to the Winooski River continue to decline (38 in 2020). New adaptive management experiments are planned for 2021
  + Radio telemetry continued in 2020 with trap and truck salmon; saw the lowest (8%) number of fish that were “fallback”; good for restoration. Most salmon overwintered in the river. Continue to track migration and timing.
  + Evaluate fish passage at dams and evaluate smolt passage and survival - bird predation

Discussion: Milliken question on low flows in 2020; is that going to be the new norm?

Ahren had a question about thiamine. Bill will send him more info.

Lake trout - Margaret Murphy (VTFWD) - PowerPoint

* Stocking reduction – explained rationale and percent reductions
* Pientka – shared figures of length frequencies with clipped and unclipped percentages for 2020
  + Saw an increase in unclipped fish in 2021 up to ~48% in gillnets (2020 was at ~35%).
* Murphy – We will continue to assess the population and consider whether further stocking reduction is needed.

Discussion – Lowell Whitney: Asked Margaret to further explain the stocking reduction process and whether sampling is done annually.

Margaret: The adult population is annually assessed by VT using gillnets.

Ellen: We are not getting as many juveniles unclipped in the trawls, but we’re not sampling as much anymore either (just 2-3 times/year for a few days, whereas previous trawling occurred much more often).

**Should we still do juvenile sampling?**

No one responded immediately. This topic will be considered later.

Sea Lamprey - Brad Young (USFWS) - PowerPoint

* Currently working a treatment in Pulaski on Lake Ontario; beamed in from the Super 8
* Programmatic scope – no significant change
  + Survey all 225 first order tribs, and many secondary tribs, to assess distribution and density of larval sea lamprey populations
  + 24 documented larval populations (first order)
  + 20 controlled with lampricides
  + 4 controlled with traps, annually
* Sampling is done on a 4 year cycle, with no treatment during the 4th year (2020 was an OFF year)
  + 3 regions on the map: NY North, south, VT North. Counter-clockwise progression.
* Effectiveness of control is currently measured as wounding rate (wounds per 100 fish) for Atlantic salmon and lake trout
* Fall 2020 TFM only
  + Missisquoi River – faced difficulties with flow regulation, but treatment was successful
  + Winooski River – successful
  + La Platte River – successful; only a few stonecat mortalities with extra measures taken during the 2020 treatment
  + TFM/Niclosamide combo treatment - Lamoille River – permitting issue with mudpuppies. Organized protest occurred at the treatment. Staff handled it well, provided information. Resulted in 38 mudpuppy mortalities.
* Adult trapping – Spring 2021
  + NY: Beaver Brook, Mullen Brook
  + VT: Trout Brook, Mallett’s, Pond, Sunderland
  + Quebec: Morpion Brook not sampled; border restrictions due to Covid-19
  + Catch of spawning adults down by about 75% in all 6 tribs. Not sure why. Possible anomaly. Possible population reduction.
* Lampricide treatments for fall 2021:
  + No treatments scheduled for 2021
  + Seneca Lake, NY / Catharine Creek treatment contracted to USFWS – successful.
  + Lake Ontario – contacted by GLFC to collaborate with NYSDEC and DFO Canada to complete their treatments – completed Trout River 7/13. Salmon River on 7/16.
* Wounding rates
  + Salmon wounding rate is consistent from about 2010 to present
  + Lake trout wounding rate has been much more variable over time
  + The wounding rate measurement does not accurately reflect the status of the adult lamprey population – we cannot accurately estimate the sea lamprey population, juvenile or adults, using this measurement
  + What else is needed to reach the wounding rate goal? We’re doing everything we can now. Not a lot of room for improvement.
    - Which begs the question, Is the goal appropriate? The number of wounds was picked arbitrarily, back when sea lamprey were very abundant.
    - Eric – comment: Don’t tell permitting or the public that this indicator doesn’t mean anything. It does show us when lamprey control isn’t good.
* Boquet River, Willsboro, NY – Jonah found a few sea lamprey adults and nests above the cascade, in the North Branch
  + Brad’s crew trapped at the dam for 6 years prior to dam removal; caught 0 sea lamprey. The dam was removed, and it was believed that no lamprey would climb above the former dam site.
  + Brad’s crew backpack electrofished the areas in the North Branch for larvae – none found. Brad suspects that this has not been and will not be an annual recurring problem. The crew did not find any other nests in the area. Those lamprey could be the first lamprey ever to get up there.
  + The conditions had to line up just right to make some passage possible. Brad thinks it unlikely that there is going to be a massive invasion of sea lamprey above the cascades.
  + The crew will increase monitoring of the North Branch area. No control treatments are needed yet.
* 2022 lamprey barriers and traps
  + NY – Great Chazy River, Beaver and Mullen brook.
    - Great Chazy - begin trapping as an assessment method; get wounding rate data.
    - Great Chazy - dam repair. Tried to fix the leaks a few times already. In 2020, they hired a contractor to use ground penetrating radar to find the leaks. Lamprey have been finding their way under the dam through these leaks. Fall 2021 - a company has been hired to fill the holes. This was an easy cost benefit analysis; the cost to treat vs. the cost of repair - repair is a lot less money.
  + VT – LaPlatte River (barrier is being built), Sunderland, Pond, Mallett’s, Trout and Youngman brook
    - Floating weir at Mallett’s Creek didn’t work. This trib produces 1000s of transformers. A new trap design with carbon rods was 95% effective spring of 2021, even with a small hole.
    - LaPlatte River barrier – install 18 inch barrier with a lip to keep lamprey below. Removes 2/3 of the treatment area and protects some listed species. Thanks to Pientka for helping get the town on board. Treatment is still needed downstream of the barrier.
  + Quebec – Morpion
* New adult assessment techniques – coordinating with Great Lakes program and learning from what they’ve tried
  + Start a mark-recapture study on our large tribs
  + Published an article on sea lamprey control in LC (in Fishes) – link in Teams Chat and email
    - Writing this paper helped us evaluate the amount of effort and the amount of control achieved so far

Discussion: Lowell: NEPA assessment plans? Brad: We will be writing the new plan this fall.

Milliken: Will share a link to the article in the Teams chat later. What is the justification for working with Great Lakes program?

Brad: We are addressing some of the same problems as the Great Lakes. By working with GLFC we can get ideas to improve our sampling and designs. Using their adult assessment methods, we will be able to get a better accurate estimate of the sea lamprey population.

**Approval of 2020 FTC Annual Report ?**

Milliken likes the new Strategic Plan Table (yey!)

* Porter moved to approve, seconded by Wilkinson
* No discussion
* **Motion Approved**.

**4. Future funding for the Fisheries program**

* Sea lamprey control
  + Supplemental funding increased in the last 3 years; base funding remained the same
  + Funding from Great Lakes Fishery Commission has decreased
  + Current balance in GLFC is $2.1M – 55% will be spent on lampricides in the next 3 years
    - $250K will go to the 2 barriers this year
    - $75K annually on staff and operations
  + Program could continue indefinitely at current funding levels
  + Congress continues to add $818K annually to President’s Budget or the President’s Budget includes those funds as Base
    - No annual appropriation to GLFC – program could last 2-3 years
    - Would need to find $361K annually to maintain the program
  + Base funding only
    - No supplemental funds
    - No GLFC appropriation
    - Program could last 1-2 years
    - Would need to find $850K annually to maintain the program
  + Tom Berry: Senator Leahy has been able to request the funding. For the first time, the 2020(?) Presidential budget includes the Lake Champlain sea lamprey funding. The Administration has not previously requested those funds; Leahy has written in to request the $818K. 2022 will probably be in good shape for GLFC funds, pushing for 2023 for USFWS and GLFC Administration request and not leave the work to the Senate appropriators. In the long run, these funds should become SOP in Administration.
    - Wilkinson: What should we be doing on our end?
      * Berry: Continue to keep everyone informed and aware of the program and tell the success story.
    - Milliken: Does the President’s budget for 2022 include the Lake Champlain funds in addition to the GLFC funds?
      * Berry: Yes. The $818K is included in the DOI.
    - Palmer: Is there potential to add the $818K to the GLFC side if we are not able to add it to the DOI side?
      * Berry: Yes. Having it in the DOI budget has importance though. GLFC funding is a one-time thing; it affects USFWS’ ability to hire staff using the funds. Having the funding under DOI would allow for more flexibility in using the funds for staffing.
  + Milliken: We should discuss between the 3 agencies how we could make the funding work for the sea lamprey program if/when things change.

**5. State of the Lake Champlain Fisheries Meeting / Outreach – Palmer, Hurst, Milliken**

* The meeting was held on 27-Mar
* Wilkinson: How valuable was this meeting? Should we continue to host it?
* Hurst: This was a good venue and we should continue to host it. for next year, we need to let people know how things are funded – It’s not all GLFC funds, it’s also Sportfish Restoration funds. Next year will hopefully be in person. Do we need 2 meetings, one in each state? We should open it up more to the public; 2020 was based on LC United and their data.
* Milliken: 155 registered; 80 participants. This meeting was successful. He strongly advocates that we do things on both side of the lake - host 2 meetings. There was tremendous interest and there are several success stories on the NY side.
* Ardren: Several groups have reached out to USWFS about promoting salmon work and success. LCBP has always helped spread the word on sea lamprey control to their constituents. Can they expand to include salmon info? Citizen science.
* Hurst: Now that we have the salmon indicators and the Strategic Plan (report card format), we are in a good position to share our info with the public.
* Howe: In regard to using LCBP staff to help with outreach, the boat stewards can certainly promote our outreach materials at the launches.
* Palmer: This was a great forum for public feedback. We were worried about how anglers were going to respond to the lake trout reduction, but the anglers at the meeting all took it in stride and many agreed with our decision to reduce stocking.

**6. Double crested cormorant findings and management – Milliken (USFWS)** [11:37]

* The new regulation took effect on 12-Feb, 2021. This regulation includes a new special permit that state and federal agencies can apply for. The special permit allows for removal of cormorants based on depredation of fish stocked by the agency. This will allow states and tribes to determine what they need.
* NY: Hurst – We have submitted the new Permit application for free swimming fish. We have retained the old permit for all other wildlife. The permit is being reviewed this week. The focus of this permit is currently on Lake Ontario and Oneida Lake cormorant control, not on Lake Champlain. Stocking in these lakes took a severe hit from cormorants in past years. We are developing a comprehensive permit for 2022.
* VT: Mark Scott – We received the special Permit on 11-June. It was received a little late to do much this year. We destroyed 21 nests on Young Island in June. We have 8 state islands to protect and we’re doing a good job so far. Concerns are with the private islands. We need to do harassment techniques first; we can’t just go in and remove cormorants.
* USDA: David Allaben – Our permit is backlogged. We’ve been working off the 2020 permit. Last year there was no lethal control, only harassment to disperse birds (200+). This year, 150 nests were found on one island (Lazy Lady?), but a pair of bald eagles is nesting on the island, preventing any cormorant control until they leave. Bald eagles were sighted on several islands in 2020; most were not nesting on those islands. We have been working hard to enter into agreements with private landowners to control cormorants.
* USFWS telemetry on Winooski River – Ardren – study led by Kurt Heim.
  + Bird predation was an indirect finding. About 12.5% of stocked salmon with radio tags were found on Four Brothers Islands.
  + Should we be expanding our studies to other rivers to understand bird predation on stocked salmon?
    - Palmer – There is only 1 year of data, with some tagging anomalies. Maybe stocking earlier would give the salmon the best chance to avoid bird predation. The FTC should discuss how to move forward.

**Wilkinson will be retiring at the end of the summer (2021).** Last FTC Policy meeting. ☹

**12. Meeting Adjourned 12:00 pm.**