**LAKE CHAMPLAIN FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT COOPERATIVE**

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

**July 16, 2020, 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.**

**Attendees:**

**NYSDEC**: Rob Fiorentino, Steve Hurst, Nicole Balk, Tony Wilkinson

**VFWD:** Eric Palmer, Louis Porter, Lee Simard, Bernie Pientka, Margaret Murphy, Kevin Kelsey, Shawn Good

**USFWS**: Wendi Weber, BJ Allaire, Andrew Milliken, Nick Staats, Jonah Withers, Bill Ardren, Henry Bouchard, Steve Smith, Brad Young, Chris Smith

**USGS/Vermont Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit:** Donna Parrish

**UVM:** Ellen Marsden, Matt Futia

**Quebec**: Jean Francois Ouellet,

**LCBP**: Meg Modley, Eric Howe

**Senator Leahy’s Office**: Tom Berry, Andrew Bahrenburg, Jillian Scannell (intern), Brittany Kainen (intern), Ashley Morrill (intern)

**Senator Sanders Office**: Haley Pero

**Representative Welch’s Office**: Thea Wurzburg

**USDA** – Fred Pogmore

**1. Meeting Convened at 1:07 pm**

-Introductions – Wendi Weber

**2. Minutes taken by – Margaret Murphy, VFWD**

**3. Review/Approval of Minutes from 2019 Policy Committee Meeting**

* Tony Wilkinson move to approve, Louis Porter Second
* No discussion
* **Approved – unanimous**

**4. Agency Announcements and Budget Updates**

* NYSDEC: Tony Wilkinson/Steve Hurst – virus update NY Pause – identified essential functions in division – stocking/hatcheries; essential personnel; trying to understand budget; 50% reduction in state allocation; hiring freeze; did not incur layoffs, but now key layoffs in fish managers. Hatcheries at 76/80 positions filled and were able to get all fish stocked; Rome Hatchery had zebra mussel problem, $120-125 million for hatchery improvements identified. Budget cuts have impacted work and field activities including creel survey on Lake Champlain – trying to begin this winter. Trout stream management plan finalized. Working on trying to simplify regs as well.
* VFWD: Louis Porter/Eric Palmer – Also impacted by COVID. Legislature passed ¼ budget and going back to pass ¾ budget. Working on state fiscal year budget. Trying to use CARES act money. Surge in resident license sales. Major funding to purchase and restore wetlands in LC basin as well as major effort in Lake Memphremagog basin from Leahy’s office through the Lake Champlain Basin Program and Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC), respectively. Grateful to Secretary as keeping our work essential for hatcheries and wardens; state workers under same guidance as rest of state. Hunting and Fishing have been allowed throughout the quarantine. Online hunter ed and turkey reporting online completed this spring in reaction to quarantine – many lessons learned from this. Budget wise – significant budget revenue shortfalls. Working on creative ideas to retain the new influx of hunters/anglers. Fish stocking also completed ahead of schedule. Hiring Freeze and most positions filled for now.
* USGS: Donna Parrish - No updates. (Eric Palmer noted Donna is planning to retire soon so this may be her last PC meeting)
* USFWS: Wendi Weber/Andrew Milliken – 85% of work force teleworking and field operations have been scaled back due to COVID-19. Hatcheries still operating and stocking is on track. Late budget this year – overall USFWS did fairly well. $65.8 million increase this year. Construction funding has been lacking. LC Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office resumed field work June 1, all other work is telework; still limited getting into Quebec for field work. Regional Fish and Aquatic Conservation Budget up slightly to $14.9 million – assessment and fish passage are not doing well though; recognized increase in USFWS base funding for sea lamprey control through appropriations, and from Leahy’s office through GLFC for sea lamprey control, salmon restoration and habitat restoration.
* Sen. Leahy Office: Andrew Bahrenburg – was hoping for more updates on FY21 budget. Sen. Leahy eager to work on bills once out of committee. Priorities for LC are unchanged; GLFC and Sea lamprey funding; LCBP funding. Hoping to keep funding levels steady or increase where possible. Election year/pandemic has made this more political this year. Potential for additional funding due to coronavirus during this next 3 week work period. Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) passed Senate and allows for solid funding for all the conservation programs. Additional funding to state governments will be more actively debated in the next few weeks.
* Sen. Sanders Office: Haley Pero – focus on immediate relief and taking up bills that address real needs. GAOA will not cover hatcheries, but will help with deferred maintenance backlog. Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) – invasive species hopefully will get passed. Heard from many about revenues being lost due to virus and inability to use CARES act funding for some of that. Stimulus bill on Senate side not as close as House side – but do share ideas with the office.
* Rep. Welch office: Thea Wurzburg – house passed additional package in May included funding to help states/localities with loss of revenue. House scheduled to vote on Great American Outdoors Act next week – expected to pass. House Appropriations – vote on next Thursday – LCBP - $13.4 million, $2 m white nose syndrome research; no reduction on sea lamprey program funding
* Sen. Leahy Office: Tom Berry – add on – ACOE issued report on Gordon Landing breakwater and recommendations to move forward with that work.
* Ellen – UVM Board of Trustees approved construction of new hybrid research vessel. Funding from Leahy’s office is much appreciated.

**5. Reports and Updates**

Fisheries Technical Committee 2019 Annual Report

Bill Ardren (USFWS)

* Summary and highlights from 2019 annual report
* Thanks to Nick Staats for heading up the report
* Pros
  + Condition factor salmon/lake trout remained high
  + Natural reproduction observed for lake trout
  + Low thiamine tolerant broodstock at White River NFH spawned for first time
* Cons
  + Sea Lamprey wounding rates above target levels for lake trout (25 vs 57.4) and salmon (15 vs 19.5)
* State of Lake Champlain Fisheries meeting was held in March; cohosted by LCU and TU
  + Well attended
  + Considering and annual event alternating between NY and VT
* Working Groups drafted Updated Strategic Plan for LC Fisheries and Protocol for Summarizing Indicators of Salmonid Condition
* Drafted River run Atlantic Salmon Restoration Plan – updated plan expected in August
  + Adaptive management and team approach
* Salmon Festival in October 2019 first one held in Vermont; planning for next festival in Willsboro, NY. 3-minute video – will send out link (<https://www.lcbp.org/2020/06/celebrating-salmon/>) and encourages everyone to watch.

Assessment and Salmonid Condition Indicators

Margaret Murphy (VTFWD) & Bernie Pientka (VTFWD)

* Overview of indicators and annual assessments conducted on lake trout and landlocked Atlantic salmon
* Annual assessment – focus on lamprey wounding, length-freq distribution
* Hatchery Brook salmon returns – 2019 up from past few years with 2015 still the highest seen yet
* Winooski River Fishway – 2019 slight uptick from 2018 but still low compared to recent years
* Boat electrofishing on rivers – Lamoille had high returns in 2019, Otter Creek very low (lots of rain there so conditions poor for sampling); Missisquoi R. sampling in recent years with lower numbers overall
* Over 90% of all salmon collected were lake age 1 in 2019
* Overview of Indicator Score card with status for past 3 years (see Annual Report)
  + Green – within range; Yellow – outside of range; Red – outside of range for a few years in a row
* Indicators Examples – compared past approved and updates
  + Improved title
  + Edited description and goals
  + Added info to table
  + Added mean and error bars to graphs
  + None of the indicators were changed
  + Document available with posted (<https://www.fws.gov/lcfwro/partnerships/reports.html>) policy committee meeting documents
* Q&A: Bill Ardren – any feedback on usefulness of indicators to management and policy?
  + Eric – might take a little while before the indicators are useful to us
    - Deviating from baseline could be good or bad – so need some way to account for that in the indicators
    - Looking good and glad we have them – but still too soon to tell

Sea Lamprey Control Status, Assessment Results, Control Updates, 2020 Plans

Brad Young (USFWS)

* Overview of wounding rates – keep in mind it is not a measure of how many lamprey there are
  + Lake trout are up and down with general decrease in last 10 years, with increase in past 3 years
  + Salmon have gone done and stayed down
  + So – need to assess the host population – what is causing the variability?
* Wounding rates above targets attributed to: uncontrolled populations (e.g., Pike River in Quebec); ineffective control, treated residuals (not very effective in some rivers), host population dynamics
  + Coordinating with Great Lakes on new approaches to more informative measures of assessment
* Fall 2019
  + 6 TFM treatments
  + Hoisington Brook was first ever treatment (1/4 mile); Mill Brook, Mount Hope Brook - Effectiveness has not been assessed yet
  + Putnam – high sea lamprey mortality but more survivors than desired. Challenging due to groundwater influence. Still evaluating how to better handle this one
  + Poultney River was assessed with less than 12 lamprey captured following treatment
  + Lewis Creek also successful with less than 6 lamprey captured following treatment
* Adult trapping – Spring 2020
  + Trapping was supposed to occur at 7 sites – none were sampled due to COVID-19 closures
    - Effect of this won’t be known until 2025 assessments
* Larval Assessment – Summer 2020
  + 6 post treatment surveys
  + No pre-treatment surveys due to no treatment next year
  + 20+ detection surveys scheduled
    - Have seen expansion of lamprey into new areas
  + Quebec assessments – all cancelled (over 20 were planned)
  + Monitoring at Morpion barrier in Quebec was not possible this year as well
* Fall 2020
  + Northwest Vermont scheduled for 4 treatments
    - 2 TFM only – Missisquoi River and Laplatte River
      * Missisquoi has several challenges with current border crossing restrictions
    - 2 TFM/Niclosamide combo treatments - Winooski and Lamoille Rivers
* Experimental resistance weir in Malletts Creek unable to be done this year
* LaPlatte River barrier is proposed to reduce extent of colonization by 2/3, construction planned for 2021; allows for reduced need for lampricide and will protect stonecats
* Great Chazy Barrier Repair project lead by Aaron Keech
  + Lamprey are able to get under barrier; used Ground Penetrating Radar to detect the leaks in the dam and will begin filling leaks with grout to reduce the amount of accessible habitat (11 miles)
* Budget- grateful to Sen. Leahy to secure annual federal appropriations. Lampricides for this fall have been purchased and will be delivered in August. Price has gone up – not an issue this year but may need additional funds in future years
  + Enough funds to get through this year and next year

River-Run Salmon Restoration Updates

Bill Ardren (USFWS)

* Trying to optimize hatcheries and improve passage in rivers to reestablish native populations in the river and support a fishery
* Youth have been engaged
* Seeing some improvements within the river fishery
* Working with partners restoring habitat – riparian restoration for other programs have also benefitted salmon – keeps sediment out of gravel, reduces phosphorus – trying to have public see salmon as indicator for these efforts that are a bit less visible
* Work with hatcheries – using brook water instead of well water has increased the number of fish returning to the rivers
* Seeing some natural reproduction in Winooski River and Bouquet River although intermittent likely due to high flows and other impacts within the watersheds that impact habitat suitability
* Developing genetic parentage based tagging at White River and Eisenhower national fish hatcheries to assess stockings are – will provide ability to assess fish stocked at each location. This can provide the ability to answer a lot of different questions with this type of tagging.
* Using telemetry to assess upstream and downstream passage at dams
* Starting to evaluate the low thiamine tolerant broodstock – paper on this topic was highlighted on cover of Molecular Ecology.

Lake Trout Research Updates

Ellen Marsden (UVM)

* Overview of % wild (i.e., unclipped) in bottom trawls 2015-2019
  + Proportion of wild juveniles is highest in central lake; Overall CPUE of all lake trout juveniles is highest in south lake
* As of 2020 eight wild year classes collected as juveniles
* Also monitoring older lake trout (Age 4+) with percent wild increasing recently (2018-2019)
* Lake Trout working group established to try to better understand where 4+ year old LT are and what their proportion is overall
  + Gillnetting pilot study in 2020 to collect at least 100 fish from each area (North, Central, South Main Lake) and assess for clips, lamprey wounding, stomach contents, and remove maxillary bone for age estimation
    - Results as of yesterday – 11% no clip in central (12/111) and 11% no clip in North (13/118)
* Results from trawls indicate high spatial variability in post-stocking movement, survival, or both
  + Need assessment of stocking strategies – tag stocked fish by strain, size, season, site
* New forage fish survey is in development – was supposed to start this spring, will start this fall instead – funded by LCBP
  + Currently, summarizing all by catch data from 2015-2019 juvenile trawl assessments

**6. Approval of Fisheries Technical Committee Annual Report**

* Louis moved to approve, Tony Second
* No discussion – Wendi indicated very well done, Louis agreed
* **Motion Approved**.

**7. Acknowledgments/Recognition**

* Bill Ardren – Thanks to “Mr. Salmon in the Winooski River” (Nick Staats). Retiring at the end of August.
* Louis – generally grateful for all the partners and cooperation in the past several months; specifically to Donna Parrish and the important role she has played at the Coop – especially as a mentor to VFWD junior staff
* Wendi – Henry Bouchard recognized with Superior Service Award within FWS – recognizing his accomplishments over past 27 years

**8. Strategic Plan for Lake Champlain Fisheries**

Review of Strategic Plan Approach and Final Draft Plan

* Man. Committee: Steve Hurst (NYSDEC), Eric Palmer (VTFWD), Andrew Milliken
* Five Year Plan 2020-2025
* Objectives, actions, and timelines focused on species that all three agencies consistently work together to manage – Atlantic salmon, lake trout, sea lamprey – within the larger context of the ecosystem, fish community, and fisheries of LC
* Does not close the door on addressing other issues and species in the future; idea of this plan was to include actionable items to be addressed in the near future with the three major areas we work most consistently
* Wendi – motion to approve. Tony second.
  + Discussion – what we want to do for outreach and getting this out to the public. Clearly show what we want to achieve. Has not been discussed yet. Can be done separately on separate call. **ACTION**: Management committee will meet to discuss via conference call
  + **Motion Approved**.

**9. Lake Champlain Basin Program Fisheries and Invasive Species Updates**

Meg Modley, LCBP

* Steering committee met – approved several grants
  + Conservation of Lamoille River mudpuppy awarded to VFWD
  + Rapid detection of ATS and trout in Bouquet river using eDNA
  + LC Basin dam screening tool – TU
  + LC Fish Community Monitoring project – UVM
* Watercraft inspection and decontamination program (Boat Stewards) – all training went online and this program was able to be implemented this year in spite of COVID-19 restrictions with minimal delays
  + Biggest challenge is tracking H&S of stewards daily
* Spiny and fishhook water flea on fishing line reported 10-14 days earlier than in the past
* Funding for cormorant control and hazing delayed
* Champlain Canal Barrier Alternatives analysis
  + Trying to reduce 6 alternatives to 3
    - Physical barrier with boat lifts
    - Modifying lock 9
* Working with Great Lakes EPA office on using a model for AIS in Lake Champlain using NOAA models
* Working with USFWS in Great Lakes and early detection monitoring program partnership and risk assessments conducted there that can be applied to LC
* Andrew recognized Meg for her work and leadership with AIS in LC

**10. Review Additional Action Items, Highlights and Next Steps from last Meeting; Identify New Action Items**

* Cormorant control order
  + Status of new order and EIS – Chris Dwyer USFWS
    - June 5, 2020 draft EIS published for public review and comment (45 days) ends July 27 <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FWS-HQ-MB-2019-0103-1411>
    - Preferred alternative is to provide greater flexibility to states and tribes
    - Would establish new permit compared to what was previously in place – main differences
      * limit to total number of cormorants that can be taken in the US based on Flyway basis
      * Great accountability for take and authorization
        + Database will help to maintain permits below threshold
      * Higher level of take than is currently in place now
  + Fred - Update on lake. Delay getting on lake this year. Working with private land owners in town of Georgia islands check and hazing. Eagle showed up and dispersed cormorants so no hazing occurred.
* Long-term funding for sea lamprey control
  + Management committee discussed
  + Needs to carry forward as Action Item that still needs work
  + Andrew and Wendi indicated that USFWS will have internal discussions and then get back to Management and Policy Committee
* Sauger Restoration Plan
  + NYSDEC – on back burner for now
* Listing lake sturgeon (fed)
  + officially under review, not yet on listing work plan
* Eel die-off
  + Bernie provided report in annual technical committee report
  + Haven’t found any causative effect – current theory is a stocking effect

**11. Announcements**

* Bill Ardren stepping down as chair of FTC; Nicole Balk (NYSDEC) is taking over role
* Margaret Murphy taking over as chair of Salmonid Working Group from Bill Ardren
* Wendi completed role as chair for Policy Committee, next chair will be Tony Wilkinson (NYSDEC)

**12. Meeting Adjourned 3:50 pm.**