

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Citizen Workgroup - Upper Missouri River Reservoirs Fisheries Management Plan
April 23, 2019 (Convening meeting)

Session Summary

COMPLETED SESSION OBJECTIVES/AGENDA ITEMS

Introduction to the Process and the Session

FWP personnel welcomed Workgroup members and thanked them for volunteering for the process. The following was reviewed and affirmed:

Summary of the Workgroup Charter

The Citizen Workgroup, convened by FWP in April 2019, will explore management alternatives and develop upper Missouri River reservoir system fisheries recommendations around specific issues identified in an earlier scoping process. The Workgroup will function in an advisory capacity aligned with state laws and policies and does not have decision-making authority. These interests are represented in the Workgroup: Unaffiliated warmwater and unaffiliated coldwater anglers; organized warmwater-angler and organized coldwater-angler groups; ice-fishing anglers; conservation groups; kids' fishing; fishing tournament organizers; landowners; outfitters; local government; local business; FWP; and general recreation. Workgroup members are expected to attend every meeting; substitutes/proxies will not be allowed. Members will also be asked to attend public open houses at the end of the process.

The Workgroup is a cooperative effort, with all members participating in formulating recommendations. Members will establish discussion ground rules to create a climate of respect and are encouraged to reach consensus on recommendations. Members are asked to bring information into the process and communicate to constituents about the process. The Workgroup will explore management alternatives and develop recommendations around the following issues identified in a recent scoping process: (1) Plan duration; (2) Plan responsiveness; (3) Yellow perch management (Holter Reservoir and possibly others); (4) Rainbow trout stocking and management (all plan sections); (5) Walleye management (all plan sections) (Issues not in rank order)

The process facilitator briefly reviewed the collaborative process; the role of the facilitator; roles at the table, and FWP personnel who will be technical resources.

Discussion Ground Rules

The Workgroup established the following ground rules to encourage productive discussion in the session and throughout the process:

- Demonstrate respect - Stay on topic; discuss issues, not persons; "hear" the other - practice active and honorable listening; allow the other to finish.
- Provide each other with a "safe" discussion environment - Manage your own communication and communication behaviors; be direct, but without a blunt instrument – "no guns, no knives".
- Strive for consensus. Allow the facilitator to use interest-based tools to assist the group toward agreement. If agreement can't be reached after additional discussion, the facilitator will poll the group and agreement will be declared based on a simple majority. That agreement will then be considered consensus.
- Manage your electronic devices so they are not distractions in the room.

Establishing Discussion Context

Where we are with the current Plan and how we got to where we are today

The upper Missouri River reservoirs and associated river fisheries are some of the most heavily fished waters in Montana accounting for roughly 10 percent of the total annual statewide angling pressure. Because of the system's proximity to Bozeman, Great Falls, Butte, Missoula and Helena, recreational use of the reservoirs will continue to grow as the fisheries become even more integral to the quality of life for those who live and recreate in Lewis and Clark and Broadwater Counties. The current Upper Missouri River Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan (2010-2019) supports a common goal to "provide cost-effective, balanced, multi-species fisheries by applying adaptive management strategies." This plan expires December 31, 2019. It is the goal of our current planning process to have a new fisheries management plan in place by end of December 2019.

Issues the Workgroup is asked to address:

- Plan duration
- Plan responsiveness
- Yellow perch management (Holter Reservoir and possibly others)
- Rainbow trout stocking and management (all plan sections)
- Walleye management (all plan sections)

Warming up - Individual Workgroup member thoughts related to Plan duration

- Given climate changes continuing, duration should be shortened from 10 years.
- We have a ten year plan/"adaptive plan" that's not been adapted during that time.
- There should be shorter duration plans to accommodate more rapid demographic and biological changes.
- What examples do we have of adaptive management?
- The Plan should be no more than 5 years.
- If the duration is too short, it takes up too much FWP time.
- Consider 10 years with annual review of goals and triggers.

Warming up - individual Workgroup member thoughts related to Plan responsiveness

- A 3 year average is not responsive enough to changes.
- Be proactive to keep from having knee jerk responsiveness.
- A 3 year running average takes too long to address changes (i.e., Perch at Holter; situations of being over target, etc.).
- Trends are useful but rapid changes need a quicker response (i.e., Holter perch).
- The Plan has resulted in no flexibility with goals and triggers "cut in stone".
- Consider consecutive declining or increasing as approach to responsiveness.
- Adjust regulations yearly based on recent gill net data.
- Consider 3 years for trends with annual evaluation of trends.
- Explore how the Plan can be more flexible so adaptive management can occur.
- The 4 year regulation review is not adequate.

Getting started – Small group work per specific issue

Plan duration/Plan responsiveness

Current situation

FWP is not free to respond to changes. We see a need for increased flexibility to make changes. Ten years is too long and not responsive enough to changes in fish counts.

“Important Questions”

- What is the financial constraint that FWP faces with consideration to changing plans?
- How many years is more ideal than 10 years?
- Can a good decision be made with data from 2 consecutive years?
- What is the appropriate balance between professional trust and triggers?
- What needs to happen in the Plan so adaptive management can occur when needed?

First cut at “interests”

- It's in everyone's interest to have a good fishery.
- It's in FWP's interest to have a Plan that will help them be effective managers and help them do their job.
- It's in the interest of the Commission to have a professional Plan that results in a good fishery and that is satisfactory to the public.

Draft “guiding principles”

- We believe that an adaptive management plan is critical to good management and that a 7 year Plan is a good place to start.
- We believe that we can learn from other similar water management plans in terms of duration and responsiveness approaches, experiences, and results.
- We believe that responsiveness should be driven by science and biology (based on a 3 year average unless rapid changes dictate a more immediate response).
- We believe that the Workgroup needs to be supportive of FWP personnel in making adaptive changes based on data.

Data needs

- Continue current data collection
- Provide the Workgroup with the latest summaries.

Yellow perch - Holter

Current situation

Yellow perch are complex to manage due to unpredictability (like managing a forest fire). At Holter, there is a social perception that FWP is slow to respond to changes and that's the reason for declining perch numbers. There is also a social expectation based on high perch population years.

"Important Questions"

- When should FWP act and based on what?
- How much or how little should FWP act?

First cut at "interests"

- It's in the interest of families, kids, all anglers - to be able to catch perch.
- It's in the interest of ice anglers to be able to expect to catch perch.
- It's in the interest of the local area to maintain the economic benefits gained from anglers who fish for perch nearly year-round.

Draft "guiding principles"

- We believe that perch are the "foundation"/keystone of the health of the reservoir system. We believe that with a healthy perch population the rest of the ecosystem can thrive.

Data needs

- Historic perch population data for both reservoirs

Yellow perch - Canyon Ferry

Current situation

It's important to achieve more realistic management goals - currently they are too high. The general angling public needs to be educated about perch ecology and management.

"Important Questions"

- How do we increase the number of perch?
- How does the River impact the fishery on the Lake?

First cut at "interests"

- It's in the interest of families, kids, all anglers - to be able to catch perch.
- It's in the interest of ice anglers to be able to expect to catch perch.
- It's in the interest of the local area to maintain the economic benefits gained from anglers who fish for perch nearly year-round.

Draft "guiding principles"

- We believe that perch are the "foundation"/keystone of the health of the reservoir system. We believe that with a healthy perch population the rest of the ecosystem can thrive.

Data needs

- Historic perch population data for both reservoirs
- Data related to how the River impacts perch on Canyon Ferry

Rainbow trout stocking and management (all Plan sections)

Current situation

The rainbow trout fishery in the Upper Missouri River reservoir system is dependent on stocking. The lack of adequate funding and availability of hatchery fish have resulted in a decrease in the quality of the rainbow fishery.

“Important Questions”

- What needs to be done to bring about adequate stocking of rainbow trout in the reservoir system? Are there reasonable strategies other than stocking?
- What would have to happen to stock at pre-reduction numbers?
- What dollars are needed and how can we influence funding for stocking?
- What is the Department attitude related to stocking rainbow trout in this reservoir system?

First cut at “interests”

- It's in the interest of some anglers to be able to harvest rainbow trout because they are the easiest year round fish to catch and there is minimal cost to gear.
- It's in the interest of the diversity of the system to have a quality rainbow trout fishery.

Draft “guiding principles”

- We believe that netting surveys should be used on all waters.
- We believe that trout triggers should be removed because they serve little purpose with a stocked species.
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Data needs

- Funding needed?
- Update on situation with hatcheries related to rainbow trout

Walleye management (all Plan sections)

Current situation

The goal for the Upper Missouri River reservoir system is to provide a long term, sustainable walleye fishery consisting of quality walleyes to harvest along with a diverse age structure. Due to the diverse nature of the three reservoirs in the system, each requires specific management tools to maintain a healthy fishery.

“Important Questions”

- Is it possible to increase or enhance the forage base?
- Would enhancing perch habitat improve the forage base?
- How can we proactively manage harvest in a timely manner to maintain the relationship between walleye and forage?
- How do we improve angler education to increase the effectiveness of harvest as a management tool?
- What size do anglers prefer to harvest?
- How do we increase the population of walleyes within the preferred harvest size class?

Walleye management (all Plan sections) cont.

First cut at “interests”

- It's in the interest of the Helena area to have the positive economic impact of walleye angling be understood and valued (i.e., tackle, boats, fuel, lodging, shopping, tournaments, and more).
- It's in the interest of adults, children, families, etc. to have a variety of fishing opportunities and experiences.
- It's in the interest of some anglers to be able to participate in competitive experiences (walleye tournaments). It's in the interest of tournament organizers to be able to do positive marketing and have some financial gain.
- It's in the interest of some dedicated walleye anglers to have opportunities to catch trophy fish.

Draft “guiding principles”

- We believe that a healthy walleye fishery means sustainable, quality fish with a diverse age structure.
- We believe that the fishery should provide maximum opportunity to all possible anglers to experience walleye fishing.

Data needs

- Last 10 years population data for walleyes in Hauser, Holter and Canyon Ferry
- Harvest data for walleyes for the last 10 years to compare with population data

Where do we go from here?

The facilitator will summarize today's meeting and send the summary to FWP who will distribute it to Workgroup members and put it on their website.

Calendar – The Workgroup will meet:

- Thursday, May 16 – 9:00 AM to late afternoon at the MACO building (Helena)
- Wednesday, May 29 – 9:00 to late afternoon at the MACO building (Helena)

“Homework” before the May 16 meeting

- Workgroup members are asked to read the meeting summary and be prepared to move ahead in exploring and developing management alternatives for the specific issues. Think about the “interests” and “Important Questions” per issue.
- Members are also asked to create a “trapline” of 5 or so people outside this group and engage them in conversation about the reservoir system. As a starting question, ask your trapline - “Do you fish somewhere within the reservoir system and if so, what do you like about it? If you don't fish, do you go to the one of the reservoir Lakes and if so, what do you do there? Be prepared to briefly summarize pertinent points as an icebreaker for the May 16 meeting.

Additional data requests

- Results of the recent survey
- Changes since the 2009 Plan
- Trends (Pete's request)