

Stonewalling the Science

The Michigan DNR Fisheries Division made a significant change to the Statewide northern pike minimum size limit (MSL) in 1993. Since that time the DNR has not completed any comprehensive evaluation of this major minimum size limit change. Due to numerous complaints from pike anglers and at the invitation of Natural Resource Commissioner JR Richardson, Upper Peninsula Sportsman's Alliance's staff fisheries biologist (retired Michigan DNR UP fisheries biologist) completed an extensive review of UP – Michigan DNR fisheries surveys targeting northern pike. Natural Resource Commissioner (NRC) JR Richardson asked UPSA to make a presentation to the NRC meeting regarding the performance of the 28-year-old pike MSL regulation. Contrary to the Proposal G Law that requires the DNR and NRC regulate the state's resources through the best scientific evidence, the NRC declined to allow this review to be presented. By default, they opted to continue to follow a failed MSL regulation despite major evidence it is not working in the northern portion of Michigan.

It has been well documented in fisheries science that minimum size limits cannot work if most waters to be regulated have slow growth rates of the target species (northern pike). The slow pike growth rates were well known to be a wide spread problem in northern Michigan. In addition, further research reveals fish species with a higher natural mortality rate cannot be stockpiled, to eventually get large. In addition, other pike research has shown pike populations without ideal habitat conditions will not prosper and grow significant numbers of larger pike. Despite this well documented science known at that time, the DNR Fisheries Division forged ahead to significantly increase the minimum size limit on northern pike in the entire state in 1993. Despite numerous complaints by pike anglers following that change the Fisheries Division of the DNR did not carryout any overall evaluation of this major regulation change.

The Lansing Fisheries Division constantly touts making more and better fishing opportunities. In reality a high MSL that is not working discourages most anglers if almost no fish ever reach the legal-size limit. Most DNR fisheries inland surveys indicate that most male northern pike in the UP do not reach the MSL. In other words, they likely die of natural causes without ever attaining the minimum size to be kept if the angler chooses to take that fish home.

The Fisheries Division established a Large Lake Survey Protocol in the 2000's to gather information on the larger lakes that the tribal fishing was likely to target. The Large Lake Surveys were considered by Michigan DNR Fisheries Division to be the "gold standard" of fishery surveys. Upon reviewing all of the Large Lake Surveys in the UP reveal that northern pike growth rates are slow (average -2.2 below state average) in all the lakes surveyed. This is considered slow growth rate for pike by MI DNR standards. That is approximately the same thing the Crystal Falls Fisheries Unit found in extensive data set from their unit pike surveys reported to the Fish Division on the pike MSL subject over the many years since the high pike MSL was adopted.

The anglers have complained about the current 24-inch MSL for years. The DNR's Western Citizens Advisory Committees passed a resolution to drop the 24-inch pike MSL and make it a no MSL as the default regulation for the inland waters of the UP. The Upper Peninsula Sportsman's Alliance representing most sportsman's clubs in the UP also passed the same resolution. UPSA representatives on several other DNR Advisory Committees also asked their respective committees to discuss a change in inland pike regulations and were told the DNR did not want to discuss this issue.

The 24-inch MSL results in only about 10 percent of the pike are legal sized in most all inland waters in the UP. That would be equivalent to a buck deer point restriction of 9 point or larger according to a DNR wildlife researcher. The MSL's on other game species typically results in about 25% of the waters fish population present are at or above the MSL. The current regulation targets all the fishing pressure on the faster growing female pike, since in most inland waters very few male fish ever attain legal size. Removing these faster growing female fish results removing the only pike inland that have the potential to grow to trophy size. Of course, in the pike world the female fish grow much larger than male fish.

About 35 years ago Wisconsin (ecologically similar to Michigan) DNR Fisheries followed Michigan DNR regarding minimum size limits on popular game fish. They adopted similar MSL on walleye, bass, muskie although they knew from fisheries research with pike a MSL would have a negative affect in the northern half of their state. Their pike fisheries have performed quite well for all these years with a No MSL on the entire inland northern half of their state.

The current bag limit of only two pike was not developed with the fishery science either. It was an arbitrary limit put into the rules by a Lansing Fisheries Administrator without peer review. It is not logical to protect a slow growing fish population where the target – northern pike, are typically over abundant with a reduced bag limit. The only logical bag restriction would be the reduced bag limit on the faster growing females with the reduced bag limit on pike over 24 inches. The bag limit of five best suits the current situation with overwhelming number of northern waters with slow growing pike. It also matches the bag limit of other game species of walleye and bass.

The Upper Peninsula Sportsman's Alliance is requesting the NRC reconsider their position and change the inland UP Pike regulations to a No MSL with a bag limit of five as the default regulation for inland waters of the UP. In the extremely few cases where DNR survey documents that pike have a fast growth rate, excellent pike forage base, ample cold oxygenated water in the summer(hypolimnion), and adequate but not overabundant spawning habitat could be considered for the exception to the No MSL waters.