

Esocid Workgroup Meeting Minutes – Nov 6, 2024

Attendees: DNR - TJ DeBates, Leslie George, Brian Herwig, Mike Habrat, Steve Mero, Brad Parsons; *Workgroup Members* - Alex Worobel, Travis Frank, Aaron Meyer, Gregg Weller, Keith Okeson, Justin Thompson; *Workgroup Member's Guests* – Pat Okeson, Chris Thury, Bruce Kitowski, Ben Olson, Bryan Rogers, Dale Mueller, George Selcke, Brent Stroeing

Agenda Item # 1. Opening Remarks, Introductions, and Recap of Previous Meeting

- Leslie provided a verbal summary from the previous meeting, which took place about two months ago. The key agenda item was the **presentation by Craig Soupir**, who led a discussion focused on the production and future stocking of **muskie yearlings**, and DNR's plans for incorporating yearlings at a 5:1 (YRL: FGL conversion ratio) and 20% of the quota stocked with yearlings.
- Someone asked: How many trout anglers in MN? Answered ~110,000 stamps were sold. It is estimated there are ~140K Muskie anglers.
- Someone asked about the ENRTF/ lottery amendment question on the recent statewide ballot – if there were any big changes in how the money would be allocated? DNR staff responded that we'd look and let group know if there any big changes.
- The Request for Proposals for future planned hatchery improvements has gone out. There was some discussion about the status of Waterville Hatchery Improvements timeline.

Agenda Item #2: Core Lakes: Mille Lacs, Vermilion, Minnetonka

1. **Overview of the Discussion:**
 - a. **Context:** The previous Esocid Workgroup (EWG) meeting discussed the potential conversion of 20% of the statewide muskie stocking plans to yearlings, but that conversation did not directly involve the "big three" lakes: Mille Lacs, Vermilion, and Minnetonka.
 - b. These lakes are considered a separate conversation because they are key to the muskie angling community in taking pressure off the remaining lakes.
2. **Vermilion Lake Stocking Plan:**
 - a. **Current Stocking:** 3,000 fingerlings annually since 2017.
 - b. **Future Management Plans:**
 - i. A creel survey is scheduled for 2026, and a population estimate is planned for 2027–2028.
 - c. **Potential Stocking Strategy:** Continue 3,000 fingerlings annually (with option for supplement stocking of up to 2,000 fingerlings in a two-year period) until the population estimate in 2027–2028, after which stocking plans, rates, life stages to stock will be re-evaluated.
 - d. **Private Sector & Yearlings:**
 - i. There was discussion about the potential for private groups to contribute yearlings to support or supplement stocking quotas. There is interest in creating a system to handle surplus fish, including yearlings and possibly even larger fish, if there is available space within the statewide program.

- ii. The current management plan for Vermilion may not specifically allow for yearly surplus stocking of yearlings, but this could be revisited in the next Vermilion Lake Management plan.
 - iii. There's a suggestion to allow private groups to buy and stock fish above the state's quota. Need to work within lake management plans, statewide quotas, and work directly with Paula. We are currently production-limited, so partnerships could/should be part of the equation. We'll have other places for yearlings (just not Vermilion, for now).
 - e. **Challenges & Concerns- Political and Social Pushback:** Despite gains in education, there remain concerns about resistance from local stakeholders, particularly walleye anglers, regarding muskie stocking. DNR must balance muskie stocking with other fisheries management needs.
 - f. **Long-Term Planning:** The group recognizes the opportunity to make changes to muskie stocking approaches is coming with the next revision of the Lake Vermilion management plan. This could include adjustments to the way supplemental stocking is handled, including the role of private organizations in stocking efforts.
3. **Discussion about Stocking Above Quotas:**
- a. There was a discussion about whether stocking fish above the established quotas would have negative effects. The consensus was that some of our stocked lakes could handle more fish because no negative impacts at current rates have been documented. However, it may not be cost-effective and there are always biological thresholds. DNR has managed these systems conservatively, at levels to create trophy muskie angling opportunities while navigating social expectations/pressures.
 - b. Someone asked: Why would we restrict surplus stocking if not expected to negatively impact? Vermilion – before anything were changed, DNR would need to talk to anglers. DNR is mindful of socio-political concerns regarding perceived overstocking in certain lakes like Vermilion.
 - c. It was requested that DNR leave some room for supplemental stocking in the LRP, if it's socially and biologically acceptable. DNR and private citizens can't just stock MUE without following the process.
4. **Challenges with Fish Production, Yearling Production, and Overwintering & Growing Fish:**
- a. A recurring issue is the difficulty in securing enough fish for stocking, as there typically hasn't been enough fingerlings to meet quotas in recent years.
 - b. Yearlings will be produced/grown at Waterville, NLH, Grand Rapids, Little Falls. Long term plan is to incorporate raising yearlings indoors in RAS.
 - c. Someone asked whether growing yearlings in specific locations like Vermillion or other places could help address shortages/logistical constraints.
 - d. In the long run, the DNR wants to transition to annual stocking of **yearlings** where possible, as yearlings survive much better than fingerlings.
 - e. The near-term goal will be to stock around **3,000 yearlings annually**.
 - f. There's discussion about growing fish indoors during their first year to minimize mortality, then move fish outdoors for naturalization for a period of time.

- g. Indoor rearing is safer, but there is a need for more capacity. Plans are in place to explore other natural ponds for overwintering fish.
- 5. **Minnetonka** –we have already been stocking yearlings, this year we stocked quota of fingerlings and the 82 available yearlings. Discussions are currently surrounding primarily stocking yearlings in Minnetonka moving forward.
- 6. **Mille Lacs**
 - a. Brad Parsons led the discussion of the Mille Lacs Update.
 - b. The DNR would like to see annual yearling stocking in Mille Lacs to replace fingerling stockings. There’s potential support for this shift, as it aligns with the lake’s overall fish population health and tribes recognize there could be an economic benefit to improving the muskie fishery.
 - c. There was initial positive feedback (or at least no major pushback) from the MLBO, and 1837 Fisheries Technical Committee regarding potential stocking changes. Was brought up at July meeting and more informally at an October meeting.
 - d. The **DNR’s research** has helped mitigate concerns about the impacts of musky stocking, especially as large year-classes of other species (walleye, perch, tullibee) are also thriving in Mille Lacs. The timing may be good right now for proposing changes to muskie stocking.
 - e. There was mention of balancing **scientific data** with **public and political relations**, especially around controversial species like muskies, and making sure stakeholders are well-informed. Someone commented that we need to release our LRP plan! We’re working on it.
 - f. Someone asked about status of zebra mussels in the lake and asked if zooplankton are doing better? Is that why we saw the good recruitment? ZM have leveled off and declined some, reached new equilibrium. Not sure about zooplankton populations yet, large backlog of zooplankton samples yet to be processed.
 - g. **Challenges and Future Plans:**
 - i. As of now, the main bottleneck remains **infrastructure**—whether it’s for growing the fish or ensuring that there are enough ponds to handle the yearlings. **Uncertainty around the future** stems from the physical limitations of the existing systems for rearing and overwintering fish.
 - ii. There’s a **long-term goal** to build up the infrastructure to consistently rear enough fish (indoor and outdoor systems), though this requires significant resources and investment.
 - iii. Ultimately, DNR staff are optimistic we can meet our goals for 20% conversion to yearlings (plus Mille Lacs and Minnetonka) in the next 5 years or so. We should have enough ponds. Most will be reared outside for now. We want to be clear that any time you raise fish for a year longer than we have traditionally, you increase the risk of losing some fish, however, we believe the survival of the larger fish outweighs those risks. There is going to be a learning curve, and there will undoubtedly be setbacks moving forward.
- 7. **Public Engagement and Communication:**
 - a. DNR staff mentioned a **webinar** to share the LRP with the wider public, including tribal partners and local groups, will occur.

- b. The DNR wants to ensure transparency and avoid getting blindsided by opposition or misinformation as the long-range plan moves forward.
- c. The discussion wrapped up with general optimism about the path forward, with the group acknowledging that the DNR is in a "good place" with current stocking efforts and is working to improve the infrastructure to meet future demands.

Agenda Item #3: Angler survey results

1. The **Angler Survey** is a state-wide survey coordinated and supported by the DNR and University of Minnesota. It typically takes place every five years and is used to gather detailed information on angler behaviors, motivations, and fishing activities across Minnesota. The latest survey results have been received and are detailed in a comprehensive 186-page document. We will email full report to attendees after tonight's meeting.
2. Historically there have been about 1.1M licensed resident anglers, 100-200K additional nonresidents.
3. **Survey Focus:** The survey covers a broad range of topics including:
 - i) Angler motivations (why people fish)
 - ii) Catch and harvest behaviors (e.g., how often they release fish, what species they target, and harvest rates)
 - iii) Use of technology (such as fish finders, apps, and social media)
 - iv) Trends and changes in angler habits over time
4. **Muskie and Pike Focused Results:** The DNR has extracted highlights and key statistics relevant to those species to streamline the review. These highlights were shared in a condensed handout, so committee members don't need to wade through the entire document.
5. **Future of the Survey:**
 - o The survey will continue to be done every five years.
 - o The survey is time-consuming but valuable, providing insights into angler activities, preferences, and any shifts in trends. With several survey rounds completed, the DNR now has a stronger foundation to analyze long-term trends in angler behavior, which will be useful for decision-making and future management strategies.

Agenda Item #4: St Louis River Estuary update

1. **Perch Lake reconnection** is nearly complete and there will be a proposed reg change to bring it in line with border waters, move to 50 in.
2. **2024 Stocking Update:**
 - a. **Background on Stocking Protocol:** The St. Louis River has been stocked with 2,500 fingerlings every other year, with an informal agreement between Minnesota and Wisconsin that Wisconsin would handle the stocking, utilizing Great Lake Strain (GLS) fish. Prior to the agreement, a mix of genetic strains were stocked, including fish with Leech Lake and Chippewa Flowage origins.
 - b. **Challenges with the 2023 Stocking:** In 2023, Wisconsin faced significant challenges in producing the necessary fish, as fish in Wisconsin's Wild Rose Hatchery contracted largemouth bass reovirus (LMBRV) and suffered a mass mortality event. This resulted in the depopulation of fish stocks, meaning no fish were stocked in 2023.

- c. **2024 Stocking:** Unfortunately, another challenge in utilizing fish from Wild Rose arose in 2024. As a result, and in an effort to get fish into the system, the Estuary was stocked by Minnesota. This was done after discussion between Minnesota and Wisconsin leadership.
- d. **Natural Reproduction and Sustainability:** There was mention of a research study by a graduate student, which showed signs of natural reproduction in the river. Based on PIT tagging data, it was found that some natural reproduction is occurring, and the river's muskie population is likely sustainable without stocking. It was emphasized that while natural reproduction may sustain a population, it may not be sufficient to provide a quality fishery. Stocking helps ensure population sustainability and a quality fishery for recreational anglers.
- e. **Future Considerations:** MNDNR is exploring alternative sources for GLS fish. We are trying to identify solutions to keep the Estuary's stocking program on track in spite of challenges that may arise. This discussion highlights the complexities of managing the fishery, balancing the biological health of the system, the need for stocking, and the social expectations of anglers.

Agenda Item #5: Statewide stocking/production update (2024)

1. Stocking and Production Progress:

- o TJ provided a handout. Fish have been larger this year. Would have made our quota if not for SLRE.
- o The state is in good shape for meeting its stocking goals with nearly all ponds drained except for one in Hinckley.
- o There's some variability in the survival rates of fish stocked in natural ponds vs. drainable ponds. For instance, New London experienced a rougher year, but Lily Pond in Grand Rapids has had a strong production of over 1,600 fish.
- o A mix of strategies has been used for rearing fingerlings, including natural ponds, drainable ponds, and using trap-netting and electrofishing. Success varies depending on conditions, and there are efforts to mitigate predation and improve winter survival.

2. Challenges with Overwintering:

- o Survival of Muskies in natural ponds, like Lake 12 or Lily Pond, are directly related to the severity of the winter conditions. A long winter with heavy snow cover will result in low oxygen and likely winterkill. Though overwinter survival does occur, the challenge is that you cannot predict the winter conditions and therefore you cannot plan for what fish will be available from the natural ponds.

3. Plans for Future Rearing:

- o The New London Hatchery produced transplants for the first time in 2024.
- o The New London Hatchery overwintered approximately 800 fingerlings in a RAS during the winter of 2023-24.
- o We hope to hold over a significant number of fish, about 2,000-3,000, for yearling production, though survival rates can be unpredictable.
- o Solutions are being discussed to improve rearing and overwintering in drainable ponds, such as aerating ponds or building structures to protect against predation.

- There's ongoing experimentation with different methods of overwintering and raising fish. While past success has been variable, there are hopes that making small adjustments to the rearing process will increase success rates.
4. **Fish Tagging and Monitoring:**
 - Tagging efforts continue to help track the success of stocked fish.
 - Plans are to tag ALL yearlings and tagging of adult fish is ongoing on many lakes. There's a general effort to increase the use of PIT tags for monitoring purposes but requires more resources and coordination across different regions.
 - TJ was to check and report back whether muskies stocked in Minnetonka were PIT tagged this year.
 5. **Predation and Winter Survival:** There's concern about predation from birds and other predators for Muskies in natural and drainable ponds, especially during winter. There was a discussion of collaborating with Muskies, Inc. on some bird netting installations. Suggested to get the conversation going over the winter, materials could be gifted, and labor volunteered to install. The current overwintering strategies are a work in progress.
 6. **Handling of Transplants and Rearing Ponds:** The need for more consistent, reliable transplant fish to supplement natural ponds, as well as handling challenges with trap-netting and rearing ponds, is ongoing.
 7. **Next Steps/Plans:** Plans are in place to possibly implement solar panel aeration for larger lakes like Lake 12, though it's still in the planning stages. Efforts are being made to pull together volunteers and resources (e.g., bird netting) to ensure that critical rearing ponds can be managed more effectively. The state continues to monitor the effectiveness of fish stocking and management, with an eye toward better long-term tracking and understanding of how fish populations are developing over time (i.e., PIT tagging).

Agenda Item #6- Long Range Plan Update

Leslie gave an update on the status of the **Long-Range Plan for Muskellunge Management through 2040**, specifically regarding the timing and process for releasing and reviewing the draft plan. Here's a breakdown of the key points:

1. Timeline and Expectations:

- **Plan Finalization:** We hope to have the long-range plan draft ready by **~February 2025** for internal review and comment.
- **Public Review:** There are plans to hold a **public webinar** about it in **February or March 2025** for stakeholders to get exposure to the LRP and its revision effort.
- **Internal and External Feedback:** Before it goes public, internal stakeholders (EWG) and our tribal partners will have an opportunity to review the plan, with opportunities for public and other stakeholder feedback to follow. The timeline will likely involve sharing the draft for input in **spring 2025**.

2. Progress on the Plan:

- **Ongoing Work:** Even without a final long-range plan, important work has already happened (issue brief and approval of yearling stocking proposal by senior managers, potential plans for the Core Lakes). The group has already been implementing many of

the strategies and actions outlined in the draft, so progress is being made (e.g., PIT tagging, public outreach on research projects).

- **Draft Status:** The draft is not finalized yet, but the team is working on it. There's an acknowledgment that sometimes timelines for these things get pushed back, but we're doing our best.

3. Use of the Roundtable:

- **Roundtable Presentation:** There was some discussion about scheduling a session at the **DNR Roundtable** event in **January 2025** to discuss the Muskellunge management plan. This would be a good venue to present the plan and address any questions from a broad audience, such as other fisheries groups or stakeholders.
- **Public Engagement:** It's noted that having a tangible document to present at the Roundtable would be helpful for framing the discussion and addressing questions from the broader community. It would allow stakeholders to speak from a place of certainty, rather than uncertainty.
- **Update:** *There is a panel discussion planned at the Roundtable, mid-morning on the 10th, to discuss the recent research on muskie and other top predators in lakes, and how that has helped guide, and provide public support for, the new LRP.*

4. Framing the Discussion:

- **Effective Communication:** There's an emphasis on the importance of framing the conversation clearly when discussing the Muskellunge plan with stakeholders, whether it's at the Roundtable or during one-on-one meetings.
- **Talking Points:** The group recognizes that presenting talking points—even if they aren't finalized—can help guide the discussion in a way that addresses key issues and avoids miscommunication.

5. Concerns and Considerations:

- **Public Criticism:** There's a note about the challenges of being criticized for not having a clear message or talking points. The group seems to agree that having clear talking points helps in managing the narrative and makes the communication more effective.
- **Collaboration and Coordination:** There's also a focus on making sure that various stakeholders (e.g., fisheries managers, local fishery groups) are aligned and that any changes to the plan or public communication efforts are carefully coordinated.

6. Future Discussions:

- **Need for Official Talking Points:** There's a suggestion to formalize the talking points to ensure consistent messaging across different platforms and stakeholder groups. When the bullet points for the plan are clear and ready, they should be shared and used effectively to maintain a united front.

Agenda Item #7: Fox Lake Update

The discussion about pausing stocking on Fox Lake touches on several important aspects of lake management, including water quality, and the decision-making process for stocking programs. Here's a breakdown of the key points:

Pausing Stocking on Fox Lake:

- There's a decision to temporarily pause stocking on Fox Lake, though this doesn't imply it will not happen again in the future. The reasoning behind this pause is that the stocking priority for the lake has been reassessed, and it's now considered a **lower priority** compared to other lakes.
- **There are better homes for the fingerlings when they are in short supply.** Would like to see habitat quality improvements before stocking is resumed. This likely means some sort of habitat restoration (improved water quality) to make it more sustainable for fish in the long term.
- **Group Consensus:** The conversation suggests that this pause in stocking is generally accepted by the group, and there doesn't seem to be major resistance to the idea. The group seems to understand that the focus is on better overall management, even if it means a temporary break from stocking.
- **UPDATE: Fox Lake received a full quota of fingerlings in 2024.**

Agenda Item #8: EWG membership/applications

The discussion revolved around several key issues related to **membership, the workgroup summit, and planning for future participation.** Here's a breakdown of the main points discussed in the meeting:

1. Roundtable and Summit Planning:

- **Roundtable Planning:** The Department is in the process of planning the January Roundtable event. While there are many ideas being discussed for sessions, Fisheries has only limited control over the event's broader planning. However, MNDNR Fisheries own Fisheries Summit in the spring was a good addition, as it allows Fisheries to have more control over the topics and format.
- **Summit Invitation:** It was confirmed that members of the EWG group will be invited to the Fisheries Summit. Specifics to be discussed further.

2. Membership and Future Workgroup Composition:

- **Current Workgroup Members:** The group discussed the ongoing workgroup membership. We are expecting current members to stay on the EWG for at least one more cycle. Guests who have formally applied will be considered for the official workgroup membership, with a selection process already in progress that encompasses all of the fish species workgroups.
- **Guests:** The question was raised about the future attendance of unofficial members once the current plan is completed. Guests are encouraged to formally apply especially during future membership recruitment cycles, when the DNR is likely to have a few vacancies to fill.
- **Application Process:** It was mentioned that a call for applications for workgroup members went out recently, and the names of those interested have been compiled. A mix of recommended new members and backup list has been identified.
- **Membership Terms:** Historically, members would serve on the workgroup **for three-year terms.** This structure was intended to ensure that the workgroup has a balanced and functional mix of participants with the integration of new ideas.
- **Membership Openings:** There are some vacancies within the workgroup, which is why new applications were encouraged. A few members had to step down due to personal or

professional reasons, so the group is working on filling those spots. Several of the guests at the June 25, 2024, EWG meeting did apply, and that was great to see.

4. Unofficial Members and Their Role:

- **Guest Participation:** There has been positive feedback about having guests attend workgroup meetings. These participants contribute valuable perspectives, yet we need to ensure that participation numbers remain manageable. While the group appreciates the additional input, they also want to maintain a balance, so the group doesn't become too large or unwieldy.
- **Critical Mass:** The group discussed the need for critical mass in terms of the workgroup's composition. There should be enough members to ensure productive meetings, but not so many that it becomes too difficult to manage. The workgroup aims for a size that allows for efficient decision-making and focused discussions.

5. Follow-up and Action Items:

- **Reapplication:** There was clarification that existing members didn't need to reapply during this current recruitment cycle but may need to in the future. We need to maintain continuity during the development of the LRP, so we're hoping all current members will stay on. Kelly Wilder (policy and planning supervisor) is managing the application process and compiling a list of interested individuals. Dept. staff will continue to work on finalizing the membership list (all current members and few new ones).

Agenda Item #9: Open Discussion

The open discussion here revolves around several topics, particularly regarding the hybrid muskie program, its challenges, and some innovative ideas for future fishery management. Here's a breakdown:

1. Hybrid Muskie Program:

- **Funding Issues:** The hybrid muskie program is heavily impacted by funding constraints. In the metro area, the amount of money available for stocking Tiger Muskies (hybrid muskies) is fixed. Each year, fishery managers need to decide how to distribute the fish based on the available budget. So, to increase the program, the budget would need to be increased.
- **Interest in Expansion:** There is some interest in increasing the hybrid muskie stocking, particularly in smaller lakes and kid-friendly fishing ponds.
- **Challenges with New Lakes:** There's some hesitation to stock new lakes with tiger muskies due to the risk of upsetting existing ecosystems (such as Pike populations) or having the muskies not thrive in new environments. However, there is a sense that with careful planning, expanding the tiger program to new lakes could work.
- **Changes in Stocking Practices:** Some lakes, like Wasserman, have been removed from the tiger stocking list because fisheries were not producing good catch rates (e.g., anglers weren't catching muskies, and fish weren't appearing in nets). Stocking efforts are focused on lakes that show better potential for sustainable muskie populations.
- **Production and Availability of Eggs:** There is an annual effort to collect Muskie eggs to fertilize with pike males for Tiger Muskie propagation. The fertilized eggs and resulting fingerlings are then raised by private growers, who sell them back to MN, and to other states. Although Tiger muskie propagation is usually done at one of our statewide

muskie egg take operations, DNR Fisheries sometimes needs to travel to lakes where offices in greater MN are doing muskie population estimates, thus requiring a large time and staff commitment.

2. Potential for Future Stocking and Ideas:

- **Expanding Stocking:** There's interest in being more flexible with stocking, potentially increasing the number of hybrid muskies stocked in various lakes, especially if more funding or support becomes available. There is a sense of opportunity to stock additional fish if money permits and if there's a demonstrated need for them in certain lakes.
- **Would we stock more tiger muskies** if private entities (MUE, Inc) gifted us the fish? Possibly. It was suggested DNR provide them a number.
- **Restocking Opportunities:** If previous lakes were discontinued for tiger stocking due to poor performance or budget constraints, they could potentially be considered for stocking again if there's interest from stakeholders who are willing to fund it.

3. Questions on Budget Cuts and Allocations:

- **Reduced Funding for Hybrids:** A member asked why the budget for hybrid muskie stocking has been reduced over time. The main reason cited was that the funding has essentially stayed the same for 20 years, and inflation has eroded its purchasing power. The number of Tiger Muskies stocked hasn't changed significantly, but with the same budget, it is becoming harder to keep up with demand.
- **Annual Stocking Rotations:** Stocking rotations were also brought up. Though some lakes were dropped from the Hybrid program others were shifted from 1 of 3 years stocking to every other year stocking.
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Summary:

- The hybrid muskie program has faced challenges mainly due to poor individual lake responses to stocking and budget constraints. However, there's interest in expanding the program, particularly for smaller lakes and kid-friendly ponds.
- **Stocking decisions** are made based on a balance between available funding and lake needs, with the possibility of restocking some lakes that have previously been discontinued.
- Overall, while there are challenges, there are also opportunities to improve the hybrid muskie program through better funding, planning, and coordination across stakeholders.

Agenda Item #10: Closing Remarks from Brad Parsons and Meeting Wrap-Up Discussions:

Brad Parsons, Fisheries Section Manager, wrapped up the meeting by discussing a few significant updates and initiatives in the world of fisheries management. Here's a recap of his closing points:

1. Key Proposed Rule Changes:

- **Walleye Bag Limit Reduction:** There is a proposal to reduce the statewide daily bag limit for walleyes from 6 to 4, with the possession limit remaining the same. This proposal has already been discussed with the Commissioner's Office and is moving through the process. While there is broad support, there are still some individuals who are opposed. The walleye workgroup is supportive overall, and outreach will continue on the issue.

- **Walleye Management Science:** Brad emphasized that while the science for walleye management is not perfect, and it's challenging to know the exact impact of bag limit changes on each lake, the broader trend is clear. Many surrounding states already have lower daily limits, and Minnesota is moving in the same direction after years of discussion.
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 - **Catch and Release Bass Season:** There is a proposal for a catch and release season for bass during spring, meaning anglers could target bass during this period, though no fish could be kept. This initiative is moving ahead and will likely require legislative changes due to current statutory requirements.
 - **Native Rough Fish Bag Limits:** A working group is focusing on setting bag limits for native rough fish species, including **Buffalo, Drum, Redhorse, Burbot, Bowfin, and Suckers**. The initiative is part of a legislative effort, and the DNR is proposing limits on these species as well. The bag limit for **Gar** has already been set at 10, and **Bullheads** have current limits set at 100.
- 2. Climate Change and Fishing Opportunities:** Brad acknowledged **that climate change and invasive species are changing the conditions for various fish species in Minnesota. In particular:**
- Bass populations are thriving and becoming more abundant, while walleye populations are facing tougher conditions.
 - This shift is influencing fishery management, where opportunities for bass fishing are expanding while walleye management may become more restrictive.
- 3. Hiring and Workforce Update:** Brad shared an update on the DNR's hiring struggles.
- The hiring process has faced delays, but they are moving forward with interviews for key positions, including technician roles, large lake specialists, and hatchery positions.
 - There has been good interest in the positions, with 150 applicants for some roles.
 - However, remote areas like Grand Marais continue to pose challenges for recruitment due to the high cost of living and lack of housing options.
- 4. The Muskie Research Coordinator Role:** Brad also addressed the question raised earlier about a **dedicated Muskie/Esocid position** within the DNR.
- While there have been discussions about creating a position dedicated to muskie management, there is no formal decision yet. **The research unit** currently handles muskie-related research, but having a dedicated person focused solely on muskie management would be beneficial.
 - This idea was included in a draft of long-range plan and remains under consideration.
- 5. Fish Stocking and Hatchery Delays:** DNR staff answered a question regarding fish stocking delays with transplants this year:
- Some transplants arrived late this year, which caused delays for getting transplants stocked into ponds for grow out. However, the situation improved with average fish sizes being larger than expected, which was a very positive outcome.
- 6. Habitat Discussion:**
- **Future Habitat Discussion:** Leslie highlighted a desire to have a conversation on habitat at the next meeting. She is interested in hearing how habitat issues are being discussed within chapters and whether the topic comes up in relation to the use of funds for conservation efforts.

- Specifically, Leslie is curious to hear how recent land acquisitions and habitat projects have been received and discussed within the angling groups community.

7. Next Meeting Schedule: The group discussed the scheduling of their next meeting:

- **Timing:** We plan to meet in **January**, likely during the **second or third week** of the month, with a tentative date of **January 22nd** as it works much better than Jan 15 in Leslie's schedule.
- **Agenda:** Will likely focus on the draft LRP, and further discussing **habitat issues**.