

Thank you to everyone who made it to the MMPA meeting on Saturday. Despite overnight snow and sketchy road conditions, we had a very good turnout and great discussion.

The issue of Forward-Facing Sonar, it's uses for muskie fishing (specifically "sharp shooting"), and what -if anything- should be done about it, is complex.

There is widespread concern that using FFS to accurately target high numbers of large muskies suspended in open water adds multiple levels of additional stressors to muskies when they are caught. In some cases, anglers are seeing significant increases in the number of dead muskies being reported.

And while not universal, there are also many anglers who feel that the ability to target these fish, in real time, with extreme precision, is crossing the line of what people would consider ethical behavior or "fair chase"... think about things like drones, thermal imaging, night-vision optics, and spotlights for hunting... all highly illegal. Many feel that it is not only unfair to the fish, but that it will change the entire mentality and culture of muskie fishing, ultimately reducing the value of these fish and leading to less concern for a fragile and limited resource. Ethics are a subjective matter, but there is no doubt that "sharpshooting" with FFS has significantly reduced the need to have broad knowledge and understanding of muskies in order to find and catch them. Sharpshooting takes away the last remaining refuge, where big muskies could disappear to feed and rest. While there is a learning curve to using this technology, an angler with FFS certainly does not need years of accumulated knowledge and skill to consistently catch big muskies.

The biggest and most elusive fish in the lake- those broad-backed, pale "blonde" females that only show up when everything is absolutely perfect -those pristine, untamed creatures that are the pinnacle of their species- have suddenly become the easiest ones to find. **It's the fish of 10,000 casts no more.**

As the leading advocacy group for muskie management in Minnesota, the MMPA has been working to gather opinions and input from the muskie angling community. We didn't come into this with a predetermined position. Our effort has been aimed at promoting good discussion, gathering information, and seeing if there is a general consensus among those who care about muskies regarding what, if anything, should be done regarding FFS.

It's worth recognizing that the MMPA, Muskies Inc, and the muskie angling community have always been at the forefront of fisheries conservation issues, taking a proactive approach to muskie management and angling regulation, and without that directive we would not have even a fraction of the quality muskie fishing we all enjoy here in Minnesota. Many of the regulations and practices viewed as necessary by responsible muskie anglers today were once considered extreme and restrictive, but have proven to be absolutely vital to maintaining muskie populations.

Panfish and walleye populations can balloon from a single strong year class, pheasants and waterfowl can rebound with one good hatch, trophy whitetail bucks can be grown in 4-5 years, but growing or replacing big muskies takes decades.

There is no method or level of stocking that can keep up with increased mortality of big muskies.

To put it simply, if we don't continually strive to put the fish first- to do what's best for the resource- we will certainly see the demise of our muskie fisheries.

We've had some pretty in-depth discussions so far, and moving forward comes down to two things:

1. Do we feel FFS (specifically sharpshooting) is going to have negative impacts on muskies?
2. If the answer is yes, what are we going to do about it?

The DNR is not going to take any significant stance or make any meaningful changes. Not anytime soon anyway. If something is going to be done, it will have to come from the anglers.

While a lot of anglers (and guides) have expressed that they would personally like to see FFS banned completely, there has been a lot less belief that a total ban is actually possible or even the right way to go. The general thought process has revolved around reducing potential negative impacts. Saturday's meeting explored a lot of ideas regarding what and how.

This is big topic with a wide array of opinions and ideas that we could spend the entire next year discussing, but if we're going to get anywhere, we need to narrow our focus and pinpoint some actionable items. The lists below encompass the ideas everyone needs to discuss if we intend to accomplish anything in a timely manner. These lists started out longer and grew during nearly every discussion, but we've shortened them down to the ideas that have had the most support so far, have the most potential to be impactful, and seem possible to actually accomplish. Keep in mind that any idea, no matter how good it sounds, is meaningless if we can't effectively implement it. There have been many other good ideas, but once you dig into them, they just don't quite make the cut.

Most of the ideas fit into one of three categories. We'll call those categories - 1.Regulation, 2.Education, 3.Suggestion. Many of them could fit into more than one category, depending on how they were implemented, but we've listed them where they seem to fit best in terms of how attainable or effective they'd be. You'll see a few of them are listed in multiple categories because they would fit quite well either way.

The *Regulation* category is just that... changes to laws/rules/regulations. These would be pursued through Legislation. The biggest advantages to this category are widespread compliance and nearly immediate impact. **If we are truly worried about what's happening right now, regulation is the only real solution.**

It's important to point out that if we choose to pursue regulation changes, we would be aiming those changes only at muskie fishing.

For us to consider a regulation it must:

1. Be relatively simple and clearly definable.
2. Be reasonably enforceable.
3. Be broad-reaching enough to have meaningful impact.

Taking everything above into context, here are the remaining ideas:

Regulation:

1. No using FFS while fishing rods are in the boat. Essentially, this would allow FFS to be used for "scouting"... locating and observing fish, structure, etc, but anglers would be required to leave their FFS unit(s) behind when they have fishing rods in the boat. This option would clearly have the most direct impact on the ability to specifically target individual fish with FFS, and as such, is the largest "reach" and may be the hardest to gain widespread support.

2. Limiting boats to having one FFS transducer while fishing muskies. This would not apply to other types of transducers. Part of what makes FFS so accurate is its narrow, directional field of view. That narrow angle also limits how much area can be seen on any given unit. To make up for that narrow view, the guides and anglers with the most experience and success using FFS for sharpshooting muskies are using at least 2 FFS transducers, with many of them using 3 or more. Several of them have told me that limiting them to 1 transducer would be the single most impactful option in regards to limiting their impact on the fishery without completely banning its use.

3. No using gas motors while using FFS. Anglers could only run electric trolling motors while using FFS. Most of the time, anglers that are “sharpshooting” are driving around the lake with their gas motor, scanning for fish, and then stopping to target them when found. This option, especially in conjunction with option #2, would significantly reduce the number of individual fish being contacted by sharpshooting in a given day.

4. Use of single hooks on any lure being used with FFS. None of the following “hook restriction” options would reduce the number of fish contacted via sharpshooting. However, they would potentially reduce the time of handling and, in some cases, have potential to reduce delayed mortality of caught muskies.

5. Barbless hooks/pinched barbs while using FFS. This can speed up the release process and reduce injury to the fish.

6. Barbless hooks/pinched barbs for ALL muskie fishing. Is it time to consider this for all muskie fishing?

7. No “sharpshooting” for muskies. Meaning- do not use FFS to locate and target individual muskies suspended in open water. This would cut right to the heart of the issue. Is it possible? Can it be clearly defined? Nothing over 20 feet of water?.. 25 feet? Can it be reasonably enforced?

The *Education* category involves ways to educate current and new muskie anglers on how to reduce negative impacts on the fishery. These could (and maybe should) be done in conjunction with other options. The downsides to this category are the large amount of work involved and the long timeframe it would take to reach significant numbers of anglers. This category would not provide any immediate reduction in negative impacts to the fishery.

Education:

1. Create an angler training course. This would be a course that new anglers (or new muskie anglers, or anglers new to using FFS) would attend to learn a wide variety of “best practices” covering everything from safe fish handling to using FFS responsibly. This option could have significant long-term benefits, but the effort required would be massive and the benefits would be extremely delayed.

There were some suggestions that this be a mandatory course. Having been through the regulation changing process before, we feel strongly that a mandatory course would NOT be possible. MN DNR operates under the directive of creating “more opportunities”, and a required course would be seen as a barrier to that.

2. Create an educational message. This could take on many forms- tv shows, radio clips, magazine articles, podcasts, online content, etc. The main idea being well-known or influential anglers putting out a message that FFS needs to be used cautiously and carefully, and that anglers need to think about the ethics of how they use it and what impacts they might have on the fishery.

3. Educational material supplied with new FFS units. This idea would branch off of option #2. The intent would be a short video that discusses and displays all of the ways we can reduce stress on caught muskies... safe handling and unhooking methods, release tools, reducing time out of water, etc, highlighting potential additional stressors to fish caught via sharpshooting and discussing the ethics of it. This video could be supplied by retailers with every new FFS unit sold. In the past, this may have been something like a DVD, but could now simply be a piece of paper, or small packet, with a QR code and a link to the video. Obviously, this would require participation by retailers and would not reach anyone purchasing an FFS unit online.

The *Suggestion* category basically involves the muskie angling community looking at its own practices, recognizing ways we could reduce negative impacts on the fishery, and promoting new or improved ideas and methods. The whole idea of catch and release is a prime example of this type of movement in action, with the muskie angling community voluntarily taking catch and release from an almost unheard-of idea to a nearly universal mentality.

The downsides to these options are the same as the education category. It takes years, even decades, for suggested “best practices” to become normal and commonplace. There are many limitations to how many anglers you can actually reach and how many of them are willing to follow newly suggested methods that are not mandatory.

Suggestion:

1. No “sharpshooting” for muskies. Meaning- do not use FFS to locate and target individual muskies suspended in open water.

2. No using FFS in more than 20ft of water. Deeper water adds potential for barotrauma.

3. No using FFS at night. On some lakes (but not all), most of the sharpshooting happens at night. Darkness can also make safely handling large fish harder.

4. No using FFS during certain portions of the season. June through mid-July has been suggested, because large female muskies frequently suspend in high numbers shortly after spawning. However, on many lakes anglers are now sharpshooting all season long and warmer water temps only increase the chance for mortality.

5. Use of single hooks on any lure being used with FFS. None of the “hook restriction” options would reduce the number of fish contacted via sharpshooting. However, they would potentially reduce the time of handling and in some cases, have potential to reduce delayed mortality of caught muskies.

6. Barbless hooks/pinched barbs while using FFS. This can speed up the release process and reduce injury to the fish.

7. Barbless hooks/pinched barbs for ALL muskie fishing. Is it time to consider this for all muskie fishing?

8. No removing muskies from the water. It has been pointed out that Florida has rules limiting or banning taking tarpon out of the water at all. Costa Rica, and maybe other countries as well, have something similar for high-value pelagic (open water) sportfish such as sailfish and marlin.

This would limit anglers’ abilities to get measurements and pictures. It would also significantly reduce stress on caught muskies. There are certainly some anglers already doing this, but I think it’s safe to assume most muskies are still measured and photographed *in the boat*. Is it time to promote this idea harder?

Is this something that could/should be put into the first category, and pushed as an actual regulation?

As you can see, there is a lot to think about. The best route is probably some combination of different ideas from the different categories.

As an example, a reasonable approach (if we chose to pursue these specific options) could be to craft Legislation limiting FFS to one transducer *and* not allowing use of FFS while the gas motor is running... And then crafting separate Legislation calling for all muskie lures to be barbless or have pinched barbs. The process Legislation goes through often results in changes or reductions in what was originally sought. Something like this might lead to attaining one (or more) of the options.

The education and suggestion ideas will take a lot of time and effort to implement. Those are things that can and should continue to be discussed.

The more time-sensitive decisions that need to be made are:

1. Are we going to pursue some sort of regulation change?

2. If so, then which one (or ones)?

Those are the questions we need the chapters to answer.

Our next meeting is March 8th at the Muskie Expo.

One more thing to point out: There is a federal excise tax on fishing-related equipment (called the Dingell-Johnson Act) that provides millions of dollars in funding for state fish and wildlife agencies to manage sport fisheries. We don't know (or understand) all of the intricacies, but FFS does NOT contribute to that funding. That's kind of shocking.

We certainly aren't going to impact federal tax law, but could/should we pursue some type of fee on FFS that would go directly to Minnesota fish and wildlife funding? Something like a \$50 annual fee for using FFS?

In posing that question, we need to state that hoping to use something like that for "dedicated funding" (stocking more muskies for example) would be highly unlikely... it would probably only be possible as something that would go the "General Fund" that the DNR operates on.

It's something to think about.

Please share all of this information with your chapters and contacts. Our March meeting will be focused on finding some sort of consensus on all of this.

Thank you.

MMPA Co-Chairs

Aaron Meyer and John Underhill