

Thank you to everyone that attended our MMPA meeting at the muskie expo last weekend. We had good representation from all of the chapters as well as several guests who provided great perspectives and insight. Our intent over the last few meetings has been to try to bring all of the discussion around Forward-Facing sonar into focus. These discussions seem to go about 100 different directions all at once, and our goal has been to narrow that down and figure out if something real can (and should) be done.

There is a lot of concern regarding how FFS changes the ethics and sport of muskie angling, as well as the impacts it will have on our muskie fisheries.

Ethical boundaries and the definition of fair chase vary from person to person, but FFS and its application for “sharpshooting” have unequivocally taken the last remaining refuge away from muskies and other fish that spend a large portion of their time suspended in open water areas. Despite being largely catch-and-release oriented, all methods of muskie angling result in some level of mortality. Sharpshooting has dramatically increased the efficiency and effectiveness of targeting open-water muskies in a way that has never before been possible. The number of muskies being caught via sharpshooting by individual anglers is staggering. Catching large fish suspended in deep open-water environments adds multiple additional layers of potential stressors to the catch-and-release mortality equation, and the more fish that get cycled through that equation, the more fish eventually succumb to those stressors.

Several prominent and well-respected guides and anglers, each with decades of time on the water, have stated that they’ve never before seen the number of dead muskies that they are encountering now, since sharpshooting has become common. Concerned anglers are reporting similar experiences anywhere sharpshooting is being practiced frequently. These dead fish are real, and they won’t be there the next time you hope to catch one, nor will they be there to contribute to successful reproduction in our native muskie waters or the propagation of fingerlings for our stocked fisheries.

Over the course of our last couple meetings, we asked the chapters to discuss all of this within their organizations, and report back. The result of that is that the overall majority have reported that they have real concerns about the future of our fisheries and they support some type of change, many specifically noting they favor some type of regulation for FFS.

Beyond that general sense of broad support for “doing something” to help preserve and protect our muskie fisheries, the specifics of what to do are still wide open. We have managed to sort through a lot of ideas and suggestions, and weed out many that just don’t fit the bill. Some ideas have continually moved toward the forefront, but even as we narrow the list of possibilities, new ideas emerge (or reemerge) as legitimate considerations. From here, our goal will be to continue to refine these thoughts and ideas, and hopefully reach a point where we can assess the viability of the best ones.

This is a difficult process. There are no perfect solutions. Every idea will have to be assessed with considerations for what is even possible, what will have meaningful impact on the fish, and what muskie anglers are willing to accept.

We’ve faced a lot of challenges to muskie management in Minnesota, but this one is different. We aren’t facing a direct enemy or attack. We have to look within our own ranks to see both the challenges and the opportunities. We all want to keep catching fish the way we enjoy most, but increasing pressure on a finite resource may deem that impossible. In a way, this could be described as a need for us to find a way to save us from ourselves. One thing is for sure- If we don’t protect our muskie resource, we ALL will lose.

Below are the ideas that remain as reasonably viable options. None of them are perfect. Perfect doesn’t exist.

1. Total ban on FFS. A lot of anglers have expressed their belief that FFS should simply be outlawed entirely. This would certainly be the simplest, most direct way of halting impacts to the resource. Being very clear and definable is a significant advantage of this option. There is no grey area. As this would have the most dramatic impact, it may be the most difficult to achieve. Difficult, but not impossible. There actually seems to be a lot of support for this from muskie anglers as well as other species anglers.

2. Ban “sharpshooting”. This would cut right to the heart of the issue and address the main point of concern regarding impacts to the resource. We all know what sharpshooting is in relation to FFS use, but can this be defined in a regulatory way? There are obvious grey areas in situations where anglers are holding their boat in deeper water while casting to structure or holding their boat on top of structure while casting off the edge. In contrast to a total ban, this option is the least clear and definable. However, many anglers have expressed the opinion that this regulation would send a clear message about where the problem lies, that most anglers would have the sense to follow the intent of the law, and that the positive impact would remain even if there is a lot of grey area where enforcement wouldn't be entirely possible.

3. Only one FFS transducer and screen can be used. This would not impact the use of other types of sonar. The narrow cone angle of FFS is what allows for the extreme precision required in sharpshooting. Many anglers are using multiple FFS units in order to scan the largest amount of water at the highest speeds. Limiting them to one unit would reduce the amount of water being scanned, thereby reducing the total number of muskies contacted per outing. Defining FFS within the wording of a regulation would be entirely possible by specifying cone angles, etc. in order to keep the regulation relevant as technology changes. For boats with multiple FFS transducers installed, screens could be removed. Major League Fishing has recently unveiled a locking device for this application. Other similar devices will likely follow.

Some advanced FFS users with specialized set-ups have stated they can scan nearly as much water with only one unit, but most anglers would certainly be slowed down by being limited to one unit. It is possible that as more and more anglers have FFS, the benefits of this regulation would be overwhelmed and negated by the sheer volume of people using it.

4. No using gas motor while using FFS. Anglers could only use electric trolling motors while using FFS. Similar to the one-transducer option, this would reduce total fish contacts by slowing sharpshooters down. In calm conditions, or for anglers with the most advanced electric trolling motor set-ups, this wouldn't be quite as impactful, but for most anglers in most conditions the gas motor is the most efficient way to cover water. This option would be most impactful when combined with a limit to one transducer.

5. No using FFS while fishing rods are in the boat. This would allow FFS to be used for “scouting” and other learning applications, but would directly stop the practice of sharpshooting. This would mean you could explore fishing areas with FFS, but couldn't actually fish while using it. Units would need to be removed or locked out while fishing. This would be highly effective if it covered all anglers and all species, but would leave some significant grey areas with what types of rods anglers might try to use if it were muskie angling specific. It might have to include language regarding lure size as a way to avoid muskie anglers trying to get away with using “walleye” type rods or other undersized gear.

6. Ban FFS on all native muskie waters. Pretty straight-forward. DNR classification would define native waters. This would protect our valuable native fisheries which do not get stocked, and would also help protect the source of broodstock for stocked fisheries. It would, however, have the potential to push additional pressure onto some stocked waters. This could be a viable option if a total ban is deemed one step too far for most muskie anglers.

7. Total night fishing ban for muskies. This is a newer suggestion that has come from multiple sources. This idea has been suggested as a way for everyone to “lose something” (the ability to fish at night) in order to help

preserve the resource. This does not specifically impact FFS or sharpshooting directly, but would have the broad-reaching impact of reducing overall fish contacts across Minnesota. The impact, however, would vary from lake to lake. There are certainly places and situations where daytime sharpshooting is very effective, but it is also true that the largest amount of sharpshooting on most waters occurs at night. This type of regulation is not unprecedented. Eagle Lake in Ontario has long had a total night fishing ban as a vital part of keeping that world-class fishery thriving. Here in Minnesota, we frequently see night fishing restrictions on Mille Lacs used to reduce walleye harvest. This option would remove many of the “grey areas” involved in the other options. As a general directive, the MN DNR currently manages most of our resources for maximum “opportunity” (sometimes, arguably, to the detriment of the resource). This option may potentially be seen as a deterrent to angling opportunity, and as such, may draw opposition from the DNR, making it harder to achieve.

8. Barbless hooks/pinched barbs. This could be defined as all lures above a certain size and/or hooks above a certain size. It is well known that barbless hooks reduce damage to fish and are more easily removed. The large hooks and large barbs common on muskie lures are often difficult to remove. This option would be helpful to all fish caught by all angling methods.

9. Do not remove muskies from the water. Removing hooks often requires a muskies head to be held above the water, placing massive stress upon the fish. They simply can't breathe, even if their body remains in the water. Removing muskies (especially larger ones) from the water for the purpose of getting measurements and pictures increases that stress. This can be compounded further if/when anglers drop a thrashing fish, causing potential physical injury. Florida has restrictions on removing tarpon from the water. Some countries have similar restrictions for large pelagic saltwater sportfish. This option would be helpful for all fish caught by all angling methods. It might be the hardest to enforce and easiest to skirt around for anglers who do not want to comply.

Many of these ideas could be very beneficial if implemented by individual anglers and promoted by the greater muskie angling community as “best practices”. These, along with many other great educational ideas, could have meaningful positive impacts on the muskie resource as a whole. Changing our actions now can result in major changes to the entire mindset and culture of muskie fishing in the future. Those ideologies can and should be considered by everyone.

That being said, regulation change (in addition to individual action changes) would have much faster and more broad-reaching impact on the resource. One of our goals here is to decide if a regulation change should be pursued, and if so, which one(s).

The above list is far too long. Each of these ideas has merit, and should be thoroughly vetted, but we really need to narrow this entire discussion and get down to just a few of the best. We need to get away from the multi-directional tire spinning, and get down to real options.

As the long-term leadership of the MMPA, we (Co-Chairs John Underhill, Aaron Meyer) are attempting to bring this discussion into focus.

Look at the problem. Find a solution.

Do our best to protect, preserve, enhance muskie fishing in Minnesota.

We don't have all the answers. We don't have a crystal ball. But we do have experience in changing rules, regulations, and management practices in Minnesota. We've built connections with people both within the DNR and at the Capitol. Those experiences and connections help us build informed opinions.

After so many conversations with so many experienced anglers, we do believe that FFS (specifically sharpshoot-

ing) poses a real and significant threat to the future of our muskie fisheries. This threat does not rest solely on FFS or sharpshooting. It is the cumulative impact of all of the advancements in tools, technologies, and knowledge that we all use in our pursuit of these fish. FFS takes the impacts of all of those things and amplifies them exponentially.

We are looking at it all with these questions in mind:

1. What is actually possible and/or what are we most likely to be able to achieve?
2. What will have a meaningful impact on the fishery?
3. What restrictions are muskie anglers willing to accept in order to protect the fish they love?

Taking everything into account, we currently feel the best route may be one of two very different options. The first would be a regulation limiting boats to the use of one FFS device. This could possibly be bolstered by also considering not allowing FFS to be used while the gas motor is running. On the surface, this route would appear to be one of the easier ones. What it would do is reduce the amount of water anglers can scan, effectively reducing the number of muskies they can target via sharpshooting. It would definitely provide a level of relief right now, while the number of people sharpshooting muskies is relatively low, however, there is definitely concern that it could become less effective as more and more anglers take up this practice.

Going a very different route, if the membership and the organization as a whole, preferred to seek a total FFS ban, we can see that as a viable, though probably much more difficult to achieve option. It's an all-or-nothing proposition. If we were successful, this would provide maximum lasting effectiveness.

Separately from (and in addition to) those efforts, we believe it would be possible and significantly beneficial to the fish to seek a barbless hook regulation.

This does not mean we have set our minds in stone or have ruled out the other options. It also does not mean the MMPA has taken an official stance. But we need to start getting real with what can be done.

We still want and need input. It may be that, as we narrow this down, some of the other options are more desirable to the membership. It will ultimately fall on the chapters to decide what we do.

We had a guest at our recent meeting who has a rich history with the world-class muskie fishery of Eagle Lake in Ontario.

Eagle Lake has a long-standing 54-inch size limit for muskies and a total night fishing ban. Both of these regulations were controversial when they were introduced. Anglers and resort owners speculated that these regulations would have negative impacts on fishing and tourism on Eagle Lake. History, however, has shown that protecting the resource has been the key to maintaining that world-class fishery, resulting in exceptional fishing and thriving tourism.

The anglers and resort owners on Eagle Lake are currently very concerned with FFS and all of the implications it may have on that fishery. We are told that they are very seriously looking at regulations to limit FFS to one pole-mounted unit (not on the trolling motor) and to not allow the use of FFS while the gas motor is running. It is very interesting that they have come to some of the same conclusions we have, even though our conversations have been entirely separate. It certainly provides some food for thought.

Most of you are aware of the current efforts to find a way to protect Leech Lake from the negative impacts of FFS. Leech Lake is not only a large and diverse muskie fishery of its own, but it is also the single most important source of broodstock for Minnesota's muskie stocking program. It is native muskie water that many would consider "the mothership" of our entire muskie management system. Biologists have long known that a signifi-

cant portion of Leech Lake's muskie population (especially the big females) spend the vast majority of their time suspended out over deep open water environments. Tracking these fish has proven that they not only go there to rest and recover from spawning, but they go there to live their lives, feed, and grow.

Sharpshooting with FFS has become the go-to tactic for many on Leech, and the reports of dead muskies are climbing alongside the reports of astronomically high catch rates for the sharpshooters. Anglers and guides have reported similar experiences on other large, native muskie waters as well.

Anglers, guides, local businesses, and the Leech Lake Area tourism bureau have been discussing this with the DNR and suggesting various special regulations for Leech Lake. Currently, they do not have an avenue for a special regulation. What they will be doing is posting signs at the public landings, providing suggestions for anglers to reduce impacts to the fishery.

The requests/suggestions will be to avoid fishing for muskies in more than 20 feet of water during the post-spawn timeframe (June through mid-July), but also consider that for the entire season, avoid sharpshooting altogether, and to consider using barbless hooks and not removing muskies from the water.

The MMPA has been asked to support these efforts.

Our discussion acknowledged that some of these requests could be problematic in the form of an actual regulation. Suggesting no fishing in over 20 feet of water can limit standard fishing practices where anglers fish the edges of steep breaklines. Avoiding sharpshooting during post-spawn certainly lessens potential stressors at that time, but does nothing for the warmest water periods when mortality is potentially the highest. A special regulation on only one lake can push more pressure onto other lakes, potentially increasing negative effects on those fisheries.

Those issues having been discussed, the MMPA voted unanimously to support those efforts for signage (not regulation) as a first step. The MMPA will be among the names of supporters listed on the signs offering these suggestions.

There was also universal consensus at our meeting that the Minnesota Muskies Inc. chapters should all ban the use of FFS in their chapter contests. This would be easy to do. It requires nothing from the DNR, has no impact on the public, and doesn't even need support from the Muskies Inc. "International" board.

Actions speak louder than words. Want to convey the message that sharpshooting is unfair, unsporting, or damaging to the fishery? It doesn't take a written position statement. Just stop allowing it. The action is the message. As a bonus, most chapters stated that they'd likely get higher participation in events without FFS because anglers who are not sharpshooting cannot compete with those who are.

Throughout this process, the anglers that have been opposed to regulating FFS or its use have often fallen back on stating our efforts should be focused on stocking instead of regulation.

There is no doubt, stocking is vital to Minnesota's muskie program. Many of our lakes are entirely stocking derived. We would have far fewer muskie angling opportunities without those stocked lakes, and the native muskie waters likely couldn't hold up to the pressure they would receive.

There is also no doubt that in many ways the stocking program needs to be improved. Changes in hatchery infrastructure, weather patterns, and muskie population dynamics have resulted in less consistent muskie production, smaller average size of reared muskies, and lower survival and recruitment of stocked muskies into the adult population. These issues effect not just DNR muskie production, but private fish growers as well. It is all far more

complicated than just raising some money to stock more fish.

And yes, in some cases reductions in stocking quotas, or quotas that could/should have been higher in the first place, have contributed to the loss of quality muskie angling opportunities.

These issues have always been, and continue to be, very important to Muskies Inc. and the MMPA. We have never backed off on our efforts to maintain a quality stocking program that delivers real results. In the last decade, the hardest part has been getting the DNR to acknowledge that what they've been doing was no longer working well enough. We anglers simply see those population changes before they do. Additionally, higher level DNR management has been resistant to doing more than the status quo for muskie management for quite some time. The good news is that, through continual interaction and reasonable messaging, we have shown the DNR that there is a clear and present need for improvements to muskie management in Minnesota. Having recognized that need, the DNR has responded appropriately. Doing the same old thing is never going to make things better. The next Long-Range Management Plan is nearly complete. It contains plans and goals for increased muskie production, especially the production of yearling muskies that will have much higher recruitment rates than fingerlings in some of our most important fisheries.

Having said all that, it is important for anglers to realize that it is not possible to stock our way out of a muskie mortality problem. No matter how much funding exists, or how productive our hatcheries are, no stocking program will ever be able account for increased mortality of large adult muskies. It is simply impossible.

Large muskies that die this year from angling mortality are dead and gone this year. Yearling muskies that are stocked this year will not be the fish we are looking to catch until the year 2035, at the earliest. Yearling muskies resulting from new or improved hatcheries will not become an important part of our fisheries until the year 2040 or later. And what of our native muskie waters that have never been stocked? Natural reproduction will never keep up.

Muskie year classes cannot be stockpiled, whether from stocking or natural reproduction. Dead 20-year-old fish cannot be replaced with 1-year-old fish, while maintaining a quality fishery. There will be a 20-year gap for every one of those dead fish. That truth does not change.

Protect the resource or lose it. The muskie anglers of Minnesota need to decide what they are willing to do (and maybe what they're willing to give up) to preserve the fish that we all love.

*Minnesota Muskie and Pike Alliance Co-Chairs
Aaron Meyer and John Underhill*