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Catch Limits Set for Lake Erie Walleye and Yellow Perch in 2004

Yellow Perch Increased; Walleye Reduced

GRAND ISLAND, NY – Lake Erie fishery managers from Michigan, New York, Ohio, Ontario and Pennsylvania agreed during last week's annual meeting to an 11 percent increase in the yellow perch catch limit and a 30 percent reduction in the walleye catch limit for the 2004 fishing season. The committee expressed optimism over the future of the fishery, as it is anticipated that strong spawning success in 2003 in both the walleye and yellow perch fisheries will lead to improvements in 2005.

WALLEYE

The international total allowable catch of walleye will be reduced by 1 million fish, for a total allowable catch in 2004 of 2.4 million fish. The Committee's Walleye Task Group—comprising scientists and field biologists—reported that walleye spawning had been poor in 2000 and 2002, and, based on these reports, the committee recommended this 30 percent reduction in the walleye limits in 2004. This reduction reflects the belief of the committee that the scarce two-year-old walleye population needs to be protected from harvest to maintain a balanced age structure in the lake. This protection is designed to help walleye rebuild. Actual harvest in 2003 was approximately 2.7 million fish.

All agencies have been closely monitoring the status of walleye spawning during the previous years and have, until 2004, held harvest constant over the previous 3 years. Very strong walleye spawning in 2003—the best spawning in more than 20 years—has generated optimism among the committee members that walleye survival and growth will be sustained and contribute to a more robust, stable walleye fishery, starting in 2005.

"Members of the Lake Erie Committee have had a challenging year managing the walleye fishery," said Lake Erie Committee Chairman Rick Hoopes, of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. "While we are very optimistic because of the strong spawning in 2003, we all agree that we must take steps this year to protect the future of the fishery. We are very pleased with the cooperation among the jurisdictions on the lake and with the dialogue that has taken place between the management agencies and the affected stakeholders."

The annual total allowable catch (TAC) is established by the LEC is allocated to Ohio, Michigan and Ontario by an area-based sharing formula of walleye habitat within each jurisdiction in the western and central basins of the lake. The walleye fisheries of eastern Lake Erie remain outside the quota management area.

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YELLOW PERCH

Yellow perch was strong in 2003—and looks strong in 2004—such that the Committee agreed to an 11 percent increase in the total allowable catch, from 9.9 million pounds in 2003 to 11 million pounds this year. An area-based sharing formula determines the allocation of these fish among the five jurisdictions on the lake. For 2004, Ontario's share is about 5.2 million pounds and Ohio's allocation is 5.1 million pounds. Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania share the remaining allocation. In 2003, all jurisdictions experienced excellent sport and commercial yellow perch fishing. As with walleye, the yellow perch spawning in 2003 was one of the best on record.

LAKE ERIE COMMITTEE

The Lake Erie Committee is made up of fishery managers representing Michigan, New York, Ohio, Ontario and Pennsylvania. The Committee's work is facilitated by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, a Canadian and U.S. agency on the Great Lakes. Each year the Committee sets the total allowable catch for walleye and yellow perch, which represents the number of fish that can be caught by sport and commercial fishers without putting the stocks at risk.

The committee heard that, like the other Great Lakes, many species on Lake Erie had excellent spawning success in 2003. These species include smelt, emerald shiners, and other forage fish. This bodes well for future fishing opportunities in Lake Erie, as larger sport and commercial fish depend on a healthy, abundant forage base.

For more information, visit the Lake Erie Committee online at www.glfcc.org/lec

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