Sport fishing is threatened

Fish biologists in Minnesota and Wisconsin agree that the Mississippi River, and in particular Lake Pepin, fishery has been neglected over the years.

"It's been left to manage itself for the most part," Bill Seibig, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources district staff specialist at Eau Claire, told a reporter.

Wisconsin has one fish biologist working 280 miles of the river. The situation is the same in Minnesota.

Bruce Hawkinson, Minnesota DNR area fish manager at Lake City, Minn., said the states share responsibilities for managing pools (water bodies between locks and dams on the Mississippi) on the river, with Minnesota working pools three and four. Pool four includes Lake Pepin from Alma and that part of the Mississippi north of Lake Pepin to Lock and Dam 3 near Red Wing, Minn.

Hawkinson said he learned through the news media of the high levels of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) being discovered in carp sampled by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Small amounts

Furthermore, Hawkinson said tests by his staff showed smaller concentrations of PCB than found by the FDA. "They were lower than the level (5 parts per million) allowed by FDA," he said.

Currently, Hawkinson is awaiting results from more testing by the Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Chicago office of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Willis Fernholz, a Wisconsin DNR work unit supervisor at LaCrosse, said PCB wasn't a known problem on the Mississippi River until 1970. It settles in Lake Pepin, a deep, wide basin some 25 miles long.

A prolonged halt of commercial rough fishing "would have an adverse impact on the sport fishery," Fernholz said.

Seek alternatives

Seibig added, "If rough fishing is stopped, we will have to consider alternatives," one of which might be hiring commercial fishermen just to remove the rough fish and dispose of them if they cannot be sold.

"I can sympathize with the commercial fishermen," Seibig said. "They're caught in the middle and have no place to turn."

Rough fish compete with game fish for survival. Carp, for example, drive game fish species out because of their rooting around at the bottom of the fishery for food sources and the water becomes turbid. Schools of carp can also wipe out game fish eggs and fry.

Focus elsewhere

The fishery problem not only has focused attention on the pollution aspect of the issue, but the size and importance of the fishery as well.

Creel census in 1974 by Minnesota officials working the Wisconsin and Minnesota sides of pool four shows that some 300,000 lbs. of sportfish (including 50,000 lbs. of walleyes, 110,000 lbs. of sauger, 70,000 lbs. of white bass, 21,000 lbs. of crappie and 10,000 lbs. of northern pike) were taken by sport fishermen.

Hawkinson said some 490,000 lbs. of rough fish (carp, buffalo, sheepshead, catfish, bullheads, suckers, quillback, gar, and other rough fish species) were taken from pool four by Minnesota commercial fishermen who must file monthly reports on their catches. Prices ranged from a high of 36 cents a pound for catfish to three cents a pound for suckers and gar.

Fernholz said Wisconsin's commercial fishermen in 1973 (latest figures available) netted close to 2.8 million pounds of rough fish from Lake Pepin alone. Wisconsin does not keep tabs on the sport fish harvest.

Fishery experts say the danger level for the cancer-causing PCB is not known and, therefore, they are reacting cautiously to the problem.

"I have no idea what concentrations would hurt a person eating game fish," Hawkinson said. Furthermore, he concurs with other fish management experts in saying that the levels in game fish probably are higher than those in rough fish.

Hawkinson doubts that game fishing would be closed on the lake, "but you might see an FDA rule or statement that a person should eat only one or two meals of these fish a week."

—Dave Carlson

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