

Minutes: Big Chetac and Birch Lakes Association Committee Meeting – June 19, 2017

Facilitator: Dave Blumer, LEAPS

Minutes prepared by LEAPS based on a digital recording of the meeting.

1) Call to Order/Roll Call

The Meeting was called to order at 2:10pm at the Birchwood Senior Center

Participants:

BCABLA: Mark Robinson

Town of Birchwood: Romaine Quinn

Town of Edgewater: Bill Zimmer

Fred Thomas Resort: Julie Thomas Telitz

Maple Terrace Resort: Jim DelMedico

Red Cedar River Partnership: Gerry Johnson

WDNR: Max Wolter (in for Alex Smith)

Absent: Bob Reynolds, BCABLA; John Depoister, Village of Birchwood; Birch Lake Representative, VACANT

2) Approval of Previous Minutes

April 2017 Stakeholders Committee Meeting Minutes were approved: Motion made by Gerry Johnson, seconded by Romaine Quinn, passed unanimously.

May 2017 Public Meeting Minutes were approved: Motion made by Julie Thomas-Telitz, seconded by Mark Robinson

Discussion:

- question about how the public meeting was advertised
- at least 30 people in attendance
- diverse attendance at the public meeting
- very diverse goals and objectives were brought up
- the meeting was administered well, with little conflict
- it gave attendees a chance to speak their mind related to the lakes

Motion passed unanimously

Newsletter Distribution – Some discussion about how the newsletter looked like “junk mail”, it went out to 560 people, was very expensive to send

3) Facilitators Update

Resort Owners Creel Survey

A handout summarizing the data received for the month of May was provided.

Currently 9 resorts participating: Maple Terrace, Doolittle Park, Fred Thomas, Nystroms, Big Chetac, Bay Vue, Red Cedar Springs, Red School, and Dalens

Reception of the survey by both resorts and participants is mixed: Some resort work hard to get it out, others don't. Some feel their constituency want to participate; others feel it is tough to get them to participate. Some only want to fill out a form if they catch a lot of fish or if they catch no fish.

There is some confusion over the DNR Creel Survey and the Resort Creel Survey

The laminated posters are really important to make this work.

Comments from Max Wolter – crappie numbers seem high compared to bluegills, but Resort Owners disagreed, crappies have been big, bluebill fishing has just begun, but nice fish being caught. Max considers the survey interesting, particularly if it continues for multiple years.

Water Quality Testing

New volunteer Michele and Pat on Birch Lake were trained in late May to collect water samples. They currently have the sampling materials and are expected to collect June samples this week.

Additional testing to collect bottom water samples for iron and phosphorus was added to the project. Also, a summer PI survey on Big Chetac was added to the project.

4) Participant Updates/Comments/Concerns

Birch Lake Representative – currently vacant

The Birch Lake Representative on the Board has been vacant since early June. Several names had been brought up by other Committee Members to replace this position.

Jason Langosch, Jay Hatcher, Tom Svitak, Bill Gentry, Jeff Bemis, Michele Roberts

After some discussion about what was known about each of these individuals, the Committee provided a list of who to contact for the position and in what order. It was felt that all were potentially good candidates for the position. Jason was the youngest of the possible replacements and an avid fisherman, so it was felt that he should be contacted first. Jay Hatcher was the second person to be contacted if Jason was not interested. Bill Gentry was the third. Dave said he will contact each person until he secured a replacement.

A brief discussion was had related to adding a position to represent Big Chetac Lake. Dave brought up Gene Isham as a possibility. He is the owner of Dalen's Resort. Rich Manning from Red School Resort was also suggested. After some discussion, it was decided to leave the Committee at 9 voting members, and not add another position at this time.

Representative Updates

Romaine Quinn – Town of Birchwood: the town is cutting a lot of trees right now that were knocked down during recent storms. Town Supervisors are interested in what is happening with the Committee, one is for herbicide use, and the other is not. There are a couple of guys that show up pretty regularly to Town Board Meetings. One of them is an avid fisherman. Not much public attendance at monthly meetings.

Jim DelMedico – Maple Terrace Resort: People are interested in the Lake Use and Fishing Success Survey. It gives them something to talk about, starts conversation about how the lakes are being managed.

Bill Zimmer – Town of Edgewater: Position of the Edgewater Board has not changed, they are still against the use of herbicides, but Bill feels they are still willing to engage and learn, and want to be a part of the new management plan. Bill attended the NW Lakes Conference in Hayward in June. Was impressed, and learned a lot. Appreciated the presentation given at the BCABLA Annual Meeting on June 10, and requested a copy to share with other board members.

Mark Robinson – BCABLA: Encouraged by the fact that there seems to be a willingness within the constituency to at least listen to what is happening in this process. They may not agree, but are still approachable. He has not been treated badly because he is the new president of the association. Newsletter went out, was very expensive, but appreciated the comments about it made earlier in the meeting. Has had a few discussions with constituents.

Gerry Johnson – RCLA & Red Cedar River Watershed Coalition: last watershed meeting was in Barron County where he gave an update of what the committee has been doing. The Coalition understands the timeout that was taken but is happy the process is moving forward again. CLP in Balsam, Red Cedar and Hemlock is expanding again, particularly bad at the north end of Balsam. Hand-pulling of CLP is happening again in 2017. Phosphorus loading to the entire watershed is a concern, and when the BCABLA gets there management plan completed, they may be funding available from the Watershed to help with implementation. The RCLA is currently in the process of updating its webpage. No EWM has been found in the system to date.

Julie Thomas-Telitz – Fred Thomas Resort: There is a huge growth of aquatic vegetation (mostly CLP) in the lake this spring and early summer. She has contacted a few other resorts to ask what their opinion of management options are. Most are not in support of harvesting, citing results on Rice Lake as the reason. They feel that Rice Lake has been harvesting for years with no results and no positive benefits.

Discussion: This generated some comments from the rest of the Committee. Dave disputes that Rice Lake is getting nowhere with its harvesting program. Bill Zimmer wondered about mapping of the

CLP to track where it is growing now. Dave mentioned that mapping was considered, but abandoned in 2017 due to time and resource constraints on the part of LEAPS. CLP mapping was not a part of the new grant, and therefore was not included in services to be provided in support of this project. Annual CLP bed-mapping should probably be a part of any future management plan.

Jim DelMedico asked if anyone knew anything about a tax to repair the dam. Romaine Quinn shared some information about a proposed 3-yr tax.

5) Discussions

Public Meeting and Annual Meeting – These were discussed previously so no additional discussion was had.

Goal Setting for the Lakes

Dave did a short power point presentation on goals and goal setting. Several handouts were given: Goals from the 2010 Lake Management Plan, revised goals from 2015 revision of Lake Management Plan, and Goals from the Public Meeting. These three documents will help to develop goals for the lake pertaining to many aspects including the fishery, water quality, aquatic plants, and education.

The focus of the rest of this meeting was on the discussion of goals for the fishery. In the 2010 and 2015 goal set, there really isn't much pertaining to the fishery except to maintain its status quo. There were a few goals from the public meeting related to the fishery. Since the largest concern among stakeholders seems to be the impacts of management on the fishery, it makes sense to start with that for setting goals. Max Wolter, Sawyer County Fisheries Manager from the WDNR attended this meeting to help discuss management goals for the fishery.

Max presented a draft report of the most current fisheries data from 2017 spring fyke netting in support of the WDNR Creel Survey that is presently going on. A formal report of this data is due out in the near future.

Max commented that Big Chetac was on a four year rotation for spring survey, and that a lot of money has been invested in walleye stocking of the lake.

He further commented that walleye are considered a keystone species – meaning that if they are doing well in a lake, it usually means the other species in the lake are doing well too.

During spring netting there were many fish in two classes: those stocked in 2014 that are 13-15 inches in length (many of these are currently being caught according to the Resort Owners Survey); and a lot of 6-9 inch fish stocked in 2016. Of the two dozen lakes with stocking going on in Sawyer County, Big Chetac is doing very well.

Northern pike are in low density, but there is still a good chance to catch a large fish. Many lakes have a lot of hammer handle type northerns. Big Chetac does not.

Largemouth bass have slightly improved in size, in that there are not as many 11-12 inch fish, but more 14-18 inch fish. Smallmouth bass are present, but not abundant and the size structure is a little smaller than largemouth.

There are lots of bluegills in the lake and many of them (1 out of 4) are over 8 inches. The largest number of fish netted, were in the 7-9 inch size range. Resort owners commented that they have heard from their constituency that bluegill fishing was picking up, and that people were catching decent size fish. One of the main reasons for stocking walleye is to reduce the number of small bluegills in the lake through predation.

Crappies are doing very well in the lake. There are currently two year classes that are abundant. A large cluster of fish 9-12 inches exists right now. There is another highly abundant year class of fish in the 5-6 inch year class. It will be these fish that will take the place of the larger ones being caught right now in a couple of years. This is a strong pattern to have in a lake for crappies. There may be some drop off in size structure over the next couple of years, but it will pick back up again as the 5-6 inch year class grows.

Only a few perch were captured as a part of the 2017 survey despite high catch rates in the 2013 survey. These results leave questions about if the timing of the 2017 was suitable to catch a representative sample of perch.

There is some big bowfin in the lake, but at a low density. They are fun to catch and act much like a bass in terms of being a predator fish. There are no management concerns with bowfin.

Comments/Questions for Max

Stocking of walleyes – when will they reach harvest size? Will this lead to a trophy walleye fishery?

Max – What does the public want? Big fish or lots of fish? The current size limit favors lots of fish, which also helps to improve the bluegill fishery. Walleye catch rates are down in a lot of lakes. A slot size limit might allow more fish to be caught, and hopefully still maintain the population and create bigger fish.

Comments from 2016 summer interviews – this is a panfish lake.

It became a panfish lake in the 70's when walleye crashed.

Max – walleye are not self-reproducing in the lake at the present time. They used to be. Lots of questions as to why they aren't anymore. Fry just hatching from spawn are not surviving. This is a region wide phenomenon, not just Big Chetac Lake. Until they start reproducing on their own, regulations/management probably won't change much.

What about spawning Habitat? Heron Creek used to be a huge spawning area, supposedly ruined many years ago when the current road and culvert was put in. Now the creek is silted in.

Max – the creek is just one piece of the puzzle, and not a large enough piece to have the impacts that are being seen. Something much bigger is going on. Maybe climate change – temperature increases, less

consistent winter and spring seasons. Too much variability these days, it is difficult to predict what any given season will bring.

Tribal spearing impacts on the walleye population were brought up – it was felt that a “vulgar” number of walleyes are taken by spearers.

Max – the practice is closely regulated by the WDNR and Tribal Resources. Modeling is done every year to determine a “safe” number of walleyes that can be harvested. There are size limits, only one big female can be taken per night. All fish are measured and counted. Can’t prevent it because walleye spearing is federally mandated. Best we can do is help make sure numbers are reasonable.

Dave asked for a record of the number of fish taken. Max said he would get that data to Dave

Dave suggested adding a Tribal Harvest section to the management plan.

Walleye habitat was brought up. Can it be improved in the lake?

Max – Adequate habitat is not usually the issue, it is something else. Big Chetac has good habitat for walleye spawning, even without Heron Creek. Again it seems to be more temperature driven. Warm shallow lakes like Big Chetac are doing worse at native reproduction than cold deep lakes.

What is the goal of walleye management? Lots of fish or big fish?

Max – this is the question that needs to be posed to the constituency. Size and bag limits could change the management goals and results. The public needs to weigh the changes that each direction of management might lead to and choose what they want.

Fishermen at the resorts would like larger fish, at least one that they can keep. Are we too far down the road as a panfish lake?

Max – that what walleye stocking does, eliminate some of the panfish. Other method of reducing panfish numbers have been studied, but are not as desirable.

Generally the WDNR is not in favor of changing bag limits for specific lakes. It confuses anglers , and in the past this was a problem, when regulations were different for each lake.

Young of the Year Survey – is this a good idea?

Max – It would be interesting as long as folks know what the best result to see is. Having large numbers of small panfish is not desirable. Having fewer smaller fish and larger fish is.

Having enough food to eat is not the issue, even when the lake was treated. There is plenty of food in Big Chetac and Birch Lakes. The available food doesn’t really change in a lake. The number of mouths eating that food does. Too many mouths, small fish. Fewer mouths, larger fish.

Bass fishing – Bass tournaments

Dave mentioned that to some people, these are very important, which led to a lot of discussion about bass tournaments.

WDNR can't deny permits if they meet the requirements

Only tourneys of 20 boats or more are required to be permitted.

No limit to the number of tourneys that can be done in a year.

Bass are supposed to be released back in the waters they are caught in. So if all fish are being returned to Little Birch, even those caught in Big Chetac that is generally illegal and doesn't follow permit guidelines.

Many resort owners and others dislike the bass tourneys because of a few very rude, obnoxious, or just plain non-law abiding tactics. A few ruin it for many.

Max – We can't manage people, but tournament organizers could promote appropriate behaviors from their participants.

Max offered to share the dates of tourneys with DNR wardens so they can patrol the waters more regularly when a tournament is occurring.

Agrees better relationships could be sought, like what was done with AIS education, even though that doesn't occur much anymore.

How about tourneys done during bass and panfish spawning periods?

There is research that shows, that this activity does not really negatively impact spawning success rates, although a few fish will leave the nest if removed by fishing, even if they are returned back in the same water. Max will share some of that research with Dave.

Can local townships pass ordinances against tournaments or set guidelines for tournaments on the water?

Max didn't know the answer.

Do bass tourneys really help the local economy? Some parts of it yes, restaurants and hotels. But not sport shops and other places.

Goals for the fishery: catching panfish brings people back to the resorts and the lake, but most people want the chance to catch a walleye or big northern, it completes the trip.

Fish Habitat – more wood helps bass and panfish, not necessarily walleyes. Heron Creek could be a restoration project but would likely have little impact on the overall walleye population. Placing gravel bars or uncovering gravels bars not likely helpful, there are plenty of gravel bars in the lake.

Are resort owners participating enough in habitat work?

It has been done in the past. Maybe it could be looked at again, but would likely center around Fishsticks. Tree drops need to be permitted if they are done by us. If a storm drops a tree in the lake it can be removed by the property owner without a permit.

We need a fisheries management plan for the lakes.

Max will share the fisheries planning process for other lakes with Dave. This section should be in the new plan.

All agreed that if the fisheries plan was addresses and accepted by the public, then most of the other issues will be easier to address.

Max agrees to help with the fisheries planning process.

Meeting adjourned at around 4:15 pm. Next meeting end of July.

Respectfully submitted by Dave Blumer, LEAPS (completed June 30, 2017)