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HAMLIN Twp. - Hamlin Lake remains one of the premier fishing lakes in Lower Michigan, Mark Tonello, fisheries management biologist, told the Hamlin Lake Preservation Society Saturday night.

About the only action he'd recommend the DNR do differently in the next six-year plan - "prescription" in DNR terminology - for the lake would be to look to plant northern muskellunge to introduce an element of trophy fishing to Hamlin Lake.

Tonello's presentation at the HLPS' annual meeting held at the clubhouse of Tamarac Village centered on the 2004 fish survey of the lake. He began though, by reviewing the history of DNR fish surveys in the lake since 1930s, concluding that in many ways not a lot has significantly changed. There long has been concern about aquatic weeds. Panfish have long been a staple of the lake. Walleye continue to naturally reproduce in the lake. Northern pike continue to grow at rates that prevent many big ones from being caught.

"Hamlin Lake as definitely gotten its share of attention from the DNR over the years," Tonello said.

Perhaps the biggest difference today from the 1932 creel survey, he said, is the lack of any muskellunge being caught. He noted in recent years a few have been brought in, but by and large, the giant gamefish has almost-disappeared from Hamlin Lake.

Then, as now, yellow perch were abundant - and small. There were more largemouth bass than smallmouth bass. Bluegills were present, though not in the numbers seen today.

In 1942, the department recommended fish stocking cease on Hamlin Lake because native populations were so strong. He also noted that the state asked the practice by private individuals and groups of netting fish in the Sable River below the dam for transfer to the lake also end. Back then individuals would net and transfer everything from adult pike to steelhead from the river. Perch and pike were mostly small that year, a common problem in Lower Michigan to this day, he said.

He noted Michigan's tiger muskie - a hatchery raised hybrid of northern pike and muskellunge - succeeded greatly in Hamlin Lake but came to an end in 1988 when the program ended statewide.

In 1989, walleye plantings began and since then 987,254 walleye have been placed in Hamlin Lake. He praised the efforts of volunteer walleye rearing groups, especially the Mason County Walleye Association saying with cuts at the DNR due to budget woes, the efforts of these groups are critical in maintaining the walleye planting program.

One other change he said he'll recommend in the next prescription for Hamlin Lake is to stock it every other year with 150,000 walleyes. That number reflects the 450,000 walleye stocked in the past six years, but which exceeded the current prescription for the lake which called for 268,000 fish over those years.

He calls this a moderate level of stocking, noting walleye continue also to naturally reproduce in the lake.

In reporting on the 2004 survey, which included a week of netting using fyke, gill and trap nets in May 2004, followed by an evening of "boom shocking" in which fish are electrically stunned, collected, examined and then returned to the lake, some, 3,464 fish representing 20 species were gathered.

"This is a huge number of fish" he said, adding that on a lot of lakes it would be typical to find about 1,000 fish.

"There's a lot of fish in Hamlin Lake he said:

Almost a fourth of the fish found in boom shocking were bluegills - 902 to be exact. They varied in size from 2 to 9 inches with an average of 7 inches in length which Tonello said was "fantastic." The fish, based on scale studies, showed above average growth and there was a very strong class -

year of birth – from 1999.

Some other findings from boom shocking:

- 298 pumpkinseed sunfish were collected with a 6-inch average length and a 9-inch upper limit.
- 1,001 rock bass from 3 to 11 inches long were collected with a 7-inch average length.
- 275 perch from 2 to 11 inches with an average length of 6 inches were found. A strong 2000 class was noted. As for the small size, he noted perch are cyclical and there will be several years of small fish followed, by a year or so of larger fish and then the cycle will repeat. Putting more perch in the lake wouldn't help, he said. It might lead to further stunting.
- 264 largemouth bass, from four to 20 inches long, were noted. "Hamlin Lake is one of the best bass lakes in the state," he said.
- 73 northern pike, from 13 to 29 inches, were checked, but only 10 were over the normal legal limit of 24 inches. He noted there is no size limit for pike on Hamlin Lake in what is an effort to reduce their numbers to encourage growth. And, he said, many pike are taken in winter by spearers and tip-up anglers, perhaps further reducing the number of larger pike seen in summer.
- 27 walleyes from 7 to 26 inches long were found including both stocked and native fish.
- Only 3 small mouth bass were found, but he noted weather and other factors might have played in this low count. "There are plenty of smallies out there," he said.

In talking about where to go from now, he said, "It's all about balance. We want to maintain a balance of both panfish and gamefish."

He said he may call for the planting of 10, 000 muskellunge into Hamlin in the next lake prescription, but cautioned even if the prescription calls for it, it may not happen, or if it does, not in those numbers: He said the state's muskie rearing program might not be able to produce those numbers. "If we even get a fraction of that we'd be doing good," he said.

Concerns muskie might eat panfish or the young of other game fish, he said, are unfounded. Their preferred diet is suckers and carp, he said.

"It would add a trophy element to the fishery and not affect the other species," he said:

He fielded questions about bass tournaments, zebra mussels and noted the most important issue facing the fishery in Michigan is the continued influx of non-native species such as the Gobi, zebra mussels and spiny water fleas. He's very worried about what the Asian carp could do if it enters the system.

The fish, he said, is now in the Illinois water canal, just 40 miles from Lake Michigan.

"There's nothing more important we can do than to shut off the , exotic species," he said.