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Tribes stock 760,000 walleye fingerlings in Great Lakes waters; analysis shows substantial contribution to walleye fishery

SAULT STE. MARIE — Despite low water conditions in some of its walleye rearing ponds, the Inter-tribal Fisheries and Assessment Program (ITFAP) was able to raise over 760,000 walleye fingerlings for stocking in local waters. Overall, ITFAP's analysis shows a significant contribution of stocked walleye in ITFAP's traditional stocking areas, from 33 percent in St. Mary's River to 90 percent in Grand Traverse Bay of Lake Michigan.

"We are very pleased with this year's production, especially considering the lack of spring rains reduced our primary culture pond to less than one-third of its normal water level," ITFAP fish culture manager Greg Wright said. "Despite the low water, the pond was still able to produce about a half-million fingerlings."

Wright added, "So, all factors considered, it was still a good year."

Early spring weather also caused difficulties with this year's walleye rearing. Matt Allard, ITFAP's aquaculture assistant said the unusually warm spring complicated walleye egg collections. "The spawning run was stretched out over a much longer time period, and we were getting a little nervous that we might not be able to collect enough spawning adult walleye," Allard said.

All ITFAP field staff coordinate their efforts during walleye spawning time to ensure that enough eggs are collected to support each year's stocking program, said Allard. This year's early spring prolonged the walleye spawning run making it more difficult to collect the target number of adult walleye for egg collection.

The 2012 walleye fingerlings were stocked at traditional stocking sites in the Great Lakes and St. Mary's River:

St. Mary's River (five locations): 304,000

Brimley Bay, Lake Superior: 99,000

St. Martin Bay, Lake Huron: 230,000

Grand Traverse Bay, Lake Michigan: 127,000

ITFAP's walleye stocking program continues to be a cooperative effort between ITFAP and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. ITFAP collected walleye eggs from spawning fish in the St. Mary's River and Brimley Bay for stocking back into those waters, as well as St. Martin Bay. MDNR provided ITFAP with walleye eggs collected from Bay de Noc, Lake Michigan, for stocking back into Lake Michigan. MDNR also assisted with trucking some fingerlings to stocking sites in the St. Mary's River.

But since production was down this year, ITFAP was not able to meet all of its Great Lakes stocking targets or provide fingerlings to MDNR for stocking in some inland lakes as it did in 2011.

Tom Gorenflo, ITFAP program director, said, "In 2011, our fingerling production was high enough to allow us to contribute walleye fingerlings to MDNR for stocking in inland lakes that are important for both the tribes and the state. We hope to resume that arrangement in 2013 when we get back to full production."

All walleye stocked by ITFAP are marked with oxytetracycline (OTC) to distinguish stocked fish from naturally reproduced fish. This helps ITFAP evaluate the success of the stocking program. The OTC mark can be seen on the vertebrae of a walleye under a special light. ITFAP collects walleye samples from tribal fishers as well as non-tribal sport fishers to look for the OTC mark.

Analysis of OTC marks shows that ITFAP's stocking program is providing a substantial contribution to local fisheries. For example, samples collected during the 2011 Cabelas walleye tournament on the St. Mary's River showed 33 percent were stocked walleye. Sampling by tribal biologists in Brimley Bay showed 53 percent were stocked walleye. In Grand Traverse Bay, sampling showed 90 percent were stocked walleye.

The OTC analysis likely underestimates how much stocked walleye contribute to the fisheries because some newly hatched fry are not properly marked and the OTC mark can fade as the fish grows older, Gorenflo added.

The stocking program is administered by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, and receives funding support from the Bay Mills Indian Community and the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians.

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