

Big Eau Pleine Flowage coming on strong after two winterkills

By Jim Servi
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Wausau, Wis. — After suffering large winterkills in 2009 and 2013, the walleye population still appears to be strong in the Big Eau Pleine Flowage.

DNR fish surveys conducted in May produced a catch rate of 60 walleyes per hour, and most of those fish already were quite large, ranging from 14 to 24 inches. The 2008 year-class of walleyes appears to be spearheading the recovery. After a 2011 survey, biologists quickly identified the strong 2008 year-class of walleyes that survived the 2009 winterkill. Although they lost some of these fish last year, that year-class still appeared to be doing well heading into the 2014 survey, according to Tom Meronek, the DNR's Marathon County fish biologist in Wausau.

Part of the concern appears to be expectations for the fishery, as well. From 1990 through 2006, three DNR electrofishing surveys showed an extremely high catch rate of more than 200 walleyes per hour. As Meronek pointed out, "People got used to those high numbers, but the fishery is now back to what we expect."

To compare it to a nearby fishery, Meronek used Lake Dubay as an example. The DNR's survey catch rate on Lake Dubay was about average this year, and produced 15 to 25 fish per hour.

According to Meronek, the Big Eau Pleine appears to recover quickly from winterkills, based on historical data and the fact that this flowage on the Wisconsin River had such a strong walleye population in the past. After the 2008-09 winterkill, fish surveys that spring showed a catch rate of 84 walleyes per hour.

The catch rate was lower in 2011, with 56 walleyes per hour, but quickly rose to 144 walleyes per hour the following year. It appears the most recent fish kill may follow a similar path. The winterkill in 2013 again saw setbacks in walleye numbers, and the DNR catch rate was only 36 walleyes per hour. However, with a catch rate of 60 walleyes per hour this past spring and a strong year-class coming up, a strong recovery

seems possible, Meronek said.

There are many people now taking an active role in ensuring the long-term viability of the Big Eau Pleine fishery. The Big Eau Pleine Citizens Organization serves as an advocate for what it calls the "60 percent solution." Its research shows that when the reservoir is 60 percent full at the beginning of winter, fish kills have not occurred. However, when the flowage is less than 60 percent full at the start of winter, the Big Eau Pleine has experienced fish kills in six of 13 years.

Aerators also play a role, and have helped, but are expensive to operate. Cathy Wendt is the director of environmental affairs for the Wisconsin Valley Improvement Company, of Wausau, the company that operates a number of reservoirs on the Wisconsin River, including the Big Eau Pleine.

"The aerators ran for 69 days last winter (2012-13) at a cost of more than \$9,500," Wendt said.

The aerators can create pockets of suitable oxygen, but it would be too expensive to support the entire fishery, she said. Walleyes For Tomorrow also stocked 5,000 walleye fingerlings in 2013.