

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS



Ontario Conservation Centre

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Lake Ontario Management Unit
41 Fish Hatchery Lane, RR#4
Picton, Ontario
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Dear Sir or Madam:

Subject: Proposed bass fishing season change

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) is Ontario's largest, non-profit, fish and wildlife conservation-based organization, representing 100,000 members, subscribers and supporters, and 725 member clubs. Our involvement in Fisheries Management Zone (FMZ) 20 has been a longstanding commitment and we continue to be an active stakeholder on both the East and West Advisory Councils. We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed bass fishing season change in FMZ 20 and offer the following input for consideration.

Background

In 2013, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) adjusted the start of the bass season to open on the 3rd Saturday in June for several FMZs in southern Ontario including FMZ 20. The risks were believed to be relatively low, because the largest bass typically spawn the earliest and are least likely to be impacted by the season change. Bass appear to be spawning earlier and fall temperatures have been warmer, which improves their condition for the overwintering period; moreover, climate change is also expected to benefit bass by stronger and more consistent recruitment.

At the time, the OFAH supported the changes for several FMZs, but had reservations for FMZ 20; therefore, we requested additional research into the timing of bass spawning in the zone to ensure there were no adverse effects. While the decision to begin the season earlier was made with the best available information at the time, there is new emerging research that shows there is more to consider.

Bass research

Research conducted under the supervision of Dr. Bruce Tufts of the Queen's University's Freshwater Fisheries Conservation Lab found that the current open season date in FMZ 20 conserves Largemouth Bass during early life stages; however, it appears that Smallmouth Bass are not being adequately protected. An average of 58% of Largemouth Bass broods had reached the swim-up stage of development by the open season date (3rd Saturday in June). On the other hand, by the same date, an average of 8% of Smallmouth Bass broods had reached this point in their life cycle. The swim-up stage is a critical period, because this is when bass nests are considered successful (MNRF, 2020).

The OFAH acknowledges that the research done by Dr. Bruce Tufts and his team has signaled that the current open season date may be putting Smallmouth Bass at risk. But further studies may be needed to improve the overall understanding of the population level impacts this may be having on the bass fishery. *Does this indicator (% broods reaching swim-up stage) reflect population declines in the bass fishery? Is angling pressure at the beginning of the open season suppressing recruitment, or resulting in a recruitment bottleneck? Can the data be modeled to better understand future implications this may be having on the bass fishery?* These questions and others, if not already understood, should be further investigated.

.....2

FMZ 20 regular season for bass

Protecting fish during the spawning period is fundamental to fisheries management and is one of the primary tools that have been used in Ontario to protect bass during the spring. Shuter and Ridgway (2002) also express the importance of additional protections that, in their opinion, should extend beyond the act of spawning itself, because bass guard their nests and provide parental care. As the research indicates, many Smallmouth Bass are still actively over their nests at the time of the current open season date which makes them susceptible to angling and when removed, even for a short duration, nests can be predated upon by species like Round Goby or abandoned by the bass. Whether captured for consumption, caught and released, or being weighed in at tournaments, the removal of bass from their nests has the potential to be a conservation concern.

The research, along with input from the FMZ 20 Advisory Council, has guided the MNRF and the proposal to split the current combined bass season into two separate seasons for Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass. The open season date for Largemouth Bass would remain the same (3rd Saturday in June), while the Smallmouth Bass season would open later on the 1st Saturday in July. It is anticipated that a later open season date would result in greater than 50% of Smallmouth Bass broods reaching the swim-up stage of development (Tufts et al. 2019).

Based on the best available evidence, the OFAH supports splitting the bass season in FMZ 20 to better protect Smallmouth Bass during the spawning period with the expectation that the MNRF will continue monitoring the fishery to evaluate the effectiveness of the regulation change.

Additional conservation concerns

We would like to highlight that the Smallmouth Bass fishery in FMZ 20 has been underperforming since the 1990s. Moving forward with the proposal will help conserve Smallmouth Bass, but there are a number of other contributing factors to these declines. The Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) identifies Round Goby, double-crested cormorants, and weather patterns as key areas of focus for future evaluations (GLFC, 2017). The long-distance displacement of bass from fishing tournaments, particularly of the largest spawning individuals, increases the abandonment and/or destruction of nests (Tufts et al. 2019). Moreover, as cited in Tufts et al. (2019), numerous studies have shown that "...consistent removal of the reproductive contribution of the largest individuals could have important long-term implications for these populations." The issues are multifaceted and may require a holistic approach to understanding the Smallmouth Bass fishery and the most appropriate management actions to be pursued.

The OFAH supports competitive fishing events provided they are operated to minimize negative biological impacts to fish and fish populations. Fishing tournaments can also provide valuable fisheries data and can be used as a means of collecting biological information on fish populations. *Can data be collected through fishing tournaments to better understand the Smallmouth Bass fishery? Are there additional best-management-practices that could be explored? Or are there other modernized techniques/strategies that can be implemented to help safeguard the Smallmouth Bass fishery?*

Early season angling options

The MNRF is also looking for feedback on early season angling opportunities for bass in FMZ 20. Both options would begin on January 1st and end on May 10th, but differ in that one includes a reduced catch and possession limit [Sport (2); Conservation (1)], and the other option consists of a catch-and-release only season. Alternatively, status quo could be maintained with no early season angling opportunities.

There are several concerns we would like to identify if the MNRF chooses to move forward with an early season opportunity for bass. As described in the MNRF's regulatory guidelines for managing bass (MNRF, 2006), bass congregate during the winter and can be susceptible to overexploitation from angling. Though the MNRF is proposing to reduce catch and possession limits in one option, likely to account for this, *could winter harvest rates potentially contradict the protections being proposed during the regular season?*

Another potential concern with early season angling for bass involves the long-distance transport associated with fishing tournaments. *Could fishing tournaments displace and disrupt bass during the pre-spawning and staging periods? What data and information were used to determine the early season end date of May 10th?* The end date must be defensible from a science/data perspective and supported by a comprehensive understanding of bass movements and patterns at this time of year in FMZ 20. We would also like to highlight that an early bass season would overlap the sensitive spawning periods of other valuable sportfish such as Walleye and Northern Pike. *Could incidental catches of these species negatively affect their spawning activities? Are there enforcement concerns with poachers unlawfully targeting sportfish during the closed season using bass angling as a guise?* In order for early season opportunities to be considered, the MNRF must be confident that these changes won't contradict the protections being proposed during the regular season or the spawning periods of other sportfish. Because of these uncertainties and unknowns, the OFAH feels that the status quo should be maintained at this time (i.e. no early season).

Closing remarks

The OFAH supports splitting the bass season as proposed, but suggests that the MNRF continues to monitor and assess the fishery to ensure the regulation change is effective, or that other management strategies may be needed to better conserve Smallmouth Bass. Early season opportunities for bass have the potential to compromise the management strategies being proposed during the regular season, and so it appears that more data and information is needed to reduce these uncertainties prior to the consideration of early season options for bass.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comment on the proposal for the FMZ 20 regular season for bass and the early season angling options, and we would be happy to further discuss our feedback at your convenience.

Yours in Conservation,



Adam Weir
Fisheries Biologist

cc: OFAH Fisheries Advisory Committee
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