

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS



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Canadian GLEC Secretariat
Great Lakes Environment Office
Environment and Climate Change Canada

United States GLEC Secretariat
Great Lakes National Program Office
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

RE: Draft Lake Superior Lakewide Action and Management Plan (2020-2024)

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. We commend the Lake Superior Partnership and supporting agencies in the development of the draft Lake Superior Lakewide Action and Management Plan (LAMP) and offer the following feedback to ensure the ecological integrity of Lake Superior and its watersheds is sustained now and into the future.

Dams and barriers

Dams and barriers can both have favourable and unfavourable consequences: a double-edged sword. They serve an important function for society but not without ecological costs including the obstruction of fish movements, alteration or loss of aquatic habitat, increases in water temperature, and dewatering of habitat. We acknowledge dams and barriers can reduce the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS) but request that greater efforts be put towards decommissioning and removal of obsolete dams (i.e., dams which no longer serve the original or any other purpose judged to be of significant societal or ecological value). We are not aware of a landscape-wide assessment that, among other things, identifies dams that can be removed, ones that should remain, candidate dams for being retrofitted with fishways and fish-friendly designs, and other mitigation actions (e.g., spawning beds). As such, the OFAH recommends establishing a landscape-level strategy to barriers involving an overall assessment and follow-through on the backend to restore lost connectivity and linkages while also preventing the spread of AIS.

For more than a decade, the OFAH was involved with the Black Sturgeon River Camp 43 Dam. Along with several other agencies and organizations (e.g., Fisheries and Oceans Canada [DFO], the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, U.S. state agencies), we did not support the preferred option outlined in the Environmental Study Report (ESR) that included the partial demolition of the Camp 43 Dam and the construction of a new multi-purpose barrier at the Camp 1 Dam site. Not until March 2020, in a letter to stakeholders, did we learn that due to the high risk of failure of the Camp 43 Dam, the government would not be going ahead with the preferred alternative presented in the ESR. Rather, the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) made the decision to move forward with urgent and critical repairs and maintain a dam structure at Camp 43. Though MECP's decision could be viewed as an eventual "win" for the OFAH and other agencies, the Camp 43 Dam issue remained stagnant for many years and was overrun with bureaucracy and politics that got in the way of sound fisheries management. During this extended period of inaction, further research could have been done to assess the suitability of the Walleye spawning habitat upstream of the Camp 43 Dam. Strategies for retrofitting the dam could have also been explored to facilitate the passage of fish like Walleye or Lake Sturgeon, while maintaining the ecological function of the dam as a barrier to Sea Lamprey. Despite the LAMP highlighting numerous examples of great inter-agency collaboration and coordination, this issue obviously demonstrates a breakdown in the process that could be improved upon by establishing a Lake Superior dams and barriers working group consisting of relevant agencies and stakeholder representatives.

Contaminants, harmful pollutants, and other deleterious substances

The OFAH appreciates continued efforts on Chemicals of Mutual Concern (CMCs) and Chemicals of Emerging Concern (CECs) including microplastics. Multiple studies have shown the negative effects CMCs and CECs have on the environment and aquatic life; thus, there is a need to strengthen lakewide rules, policies, and methods for addressing them. The OFAH wants to see significant funding for research, monitoring, and assessment to enhance our knowledge and understanding of these chemicals and to better anticipate deleterious effects and we urge governments to use a precautionary approach for preventing harmful pollutants from entering our valuable water resources.

There are four chemical contaminant sub-indicators in the Lake Superior basin whose status and trends are in the “Fair” category, and we want to see these improved to “Good” and eventually allow for human consumption of fish and wildlife unrestricted by concerns due to harmful pollutants. Mercury concentrations in Lake Superior Lake Trout are higher than any other Great Lake, atmospheric transport and deposition is a major ongoing threat, and chemicals continue to be released into Lake Superior via point and non-point sources from mining, wastewater and stormwater overflows and discharges, and agricultural runoff. When compared to other Great Lakes, Lake Superior might be in the best overall condition, but the aggregated impacts of these stressors are compromising the health of Lake Superior and eventually there will be a breaking point. As such, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), and supporting government authorities need to develop and implement a transparent, publicly accessible tracking system for cumulative effects as well as establish landscape-level thresholds and tolerances for human-related activities and disturbances. A similar approach could be applied to road networks within the Lake Superior watershed that looks at road salts entering the environment, strategies for reversing the projected trends of increasing chloride concentrations in Great Lakes’ rivers and streams, as well as investigating environmentally friendly alternatives to road salts.

Fisheries research, monitoring, and assessment

With over 1.3 million anglers in Ontario, contributing nearly \$2.5 billion to the economy each year (NDMNR, 2022), the importance of recreational fisheries cannot be overstated. Iconic, sought-after sportfish like Brook Trout need to be conserved, and species at risk such as Lake Sturgeon require restoration so that they can once again be angled for by future generations and continues to be important to Indigenous communities. Resources must be allocated to the agencies involved, but an engaged Great Lakes community will also benefit from government funding opportunities to enable them to undertake strategic, guided restoration projects (e.g., Recreational Fisheries Conservation Partnerships Program, Great Lakes Guardian Community Fund, EcoAction). Planning processes that engage communities and provide strategic direction on protection and restoration opportunities are also needed.

Funds must be earmarked for monitoring and assessment to improve the understanding of the current and long-term health and condition of Lake Superior over time, including fishery stressors, angling pressure, contaminant loads, and increased understanding of non-native species distributions. The OFAH recommends looking into additional funding streams for research and academia, more specifically, tracking of fish species and habitat usage under the Great Lakes Acoustic Telemetry Observation System. This approach will help guide future habitat restoration, rehabilitation, and enhancement projects and facilitate the identification of areas requiring additional conservation measures. The Lake Erie receiver array is the most comprehensive of all the Great Lakes, and we see added value working towards a similar monitoring and tracking network in Lake Superior to help achieve goals and objectives outlined in the LAMP.

We would also like to highlight the importance of integrative, bi-national lakewide monitoring. For example, since the 1970s, the U.S. has conducted annual bottom trawl tows to provide an index of Alewife abundance in Lake Ontario which, historically, has been extrapolated to the entire lake. However, not until 2016 did Ontario begin conducting its own surveys and soon revealed stark differences in Alewife distribution between jurisdictions and throughout the lake. Canadian and U.S. agencies need to learn from these lessons and ensure collaborative monitoring is done at a lakewide level to capture variances and to better manage the aquatic ecosystem.

Funding transparency and tracking goals and objectives

The Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health is an important mechanism by which Canada delivers on its obligations under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) including associated action items outlined in LAMPs. It is our understanding that economic investments are not reported binationally through the GLWQA; however, in the future, it may be important to make this information more publicly available (i.e., how and where dollars are being spent). This could incentivize agencies to increase funding amounts, help identify where to allocate/reallocate and prioritize funding and would provide greater public transparency and accountability.

The economics of the LAMP should be more accessible and there is a need for better reporting on the status of actions identified in the LAMP (i.e., end of cycle “report card”). We acknowledge the science is continually being updated through each LAMP cycle and is reflected in the State of the Great Lakes Indicators. This information is used to assess conditions against the general objectives and helps inform the next series of actions; however, it would be beneficial to include statuses next to each action item (i.e., complete/incomplete, ongoing, undetermined) as well as including anticipated timelines where applicable. This will provide a more comprehensive overview of the LAMP and assist in the tracking of goals and objectives (what has been achieved or still requires additional attention).

Special designations and international commitments

Action 17 in Table 9 (“LAMP actions to protect and restore habitat and species”) looks at formally establishing the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area in Canada and implementing actions identified in the 2016 Interim Management Plan. In general, the OFAH cautiously supports special designations for the conservation of natural resources. However, special protections and designations can unintentionally shut important stakeholders, like anglers, out of the process of conserving fish and fish habitat and helping achieve conservation goals and objectives, including restoration, recovery, and rehabilitation initiatives. Within the limits of the resource, angling is a sustainable activity compatible with special designations and should be explicitly recognized as such in policy and other strategic documents; moreover, the decision of whether to allow or prohibit fishing in protected areas should be scientifically defensible. Similarly, Figure 18 (“Selected Parks and Protected Areas in the Lake Superior”) shows various protected areas under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) banner. Keeping our previous comments in mind, we suggest that the agencies involved further pursue the establishment of the “areas with potential for IUCN classification” to enhance the conservation and resiliency of Lake Superior and its watersheds, while permitting sustainable use activities.

It is our understanding that National Marine Conservation Areas may be counted towards Canada’s marine and inland waters conservation targets of twenty-five per cent by 2025 and thirty per cent by 2030. Protecting these areas is necessary for the ongoing sustainability and productivity of Canada’s fisheries; however, arbitrarily choosing targets has the potential to result in uninformed or ill-advised decisions for meeting international commitments. Areas requiring protection should receive such, while ones that do not require protection should not be lumped into special designation categories. The identification and establishment of significant areas must be based on sound ecological, economic, and social factors and criteria, and not based on emotion or political agendas. Our worry is that agencies will unnecessarily impose restrictions in areas that may not benefit from long-term protection and conservation, and we caution the government on the potential ramifications for the recreational angling community and other lake users. Lastly, in 2019, the Ecologically Significant Areas (ESAs) provisions (section 35.2) of the Fisheries Act were “modernized and strengthened” to provide enhanced conservation and protection of priority fish and fish habitat areas through ESA-specific regulations. We are curious how National Marine Conservation Areas tie into ESAs and the ‘National Framework for Identifying, Establishing, and Managing ESAs,’ and are there additional plans to establish ESAs in Lake Superior?

Aquaculture

Actions identified in the LAMP correspond to major threats that are affecting one or more of the general objectives outlined in the GLWQA; as such, aquaculture should be included in the plan. The OFAH supports sustainable aquaculture that is highly regulated in the interest of protecting wild fish, fish habitat, and fisheries. However, there are several key areas of concern, particularly with open water cage facilities, the OFAH would like to call attention to including: 1) the loss or degradation of fish habitat; 2) the deleterious ecological impacts resulting from the intentional or unintentional introduction of non-native species; 3) the loss of genetic fitness of native species through inter-breeding with fish; 4) the spread of fish pathogens and diseases that could impact self-sustaining natural fish populations; and 5) the harvest of wild fish or gametes for the purpose of aquaculture that could impact self-sustaining natural populations.

In an Aquaculture Feasibility Assessment (2021), the Community Economic Development Commission of Thunder Bay (CEDC) explores, among other things, lake-based opportunities for net pen aquaculture along the north, nearshore areas of Lake Superior, “an area of approximately 180 km.” Based on the site selection criteria, three areas were chosen including Pie Island to Victoria Island, the mouth of Black Bay, and Nipigon Bay. This is especially concerning to the OFAH, our members, and the recreational angling community and, considering recent federal and provincial proposals for aquaculture, we are not confident fisheries will be adequately conserved. For example, DFO’s Discussion Paper on ‘A Canadian Aquaculture Act’ lacks elements related to fish stock conservation and fish habitat protection, while Ontario’s approach to licensing aquaculture elaborates on streamlining the regulatory framework and reducing unnecessary red tape and regulatory burden on business. We recommend ECCC, the U.S. EPA, and supporting agencies recognize aquaculture in the LAMP and ensure proper safeguards are in place and steps are taken to prevent any negative environmental outcomes from occurring.

Closing remarks

The OFAH deeply values LAMPs and the contributions from the various agencies involved, but the GLWQA, the annexes, and innumerable offshoots and moving parts lend themselves to a complicated system that is difficult to navigate. As such, ECCC and the U.S. EPA should streamline the GLWQA network and establish a more structured, user-friendly, communal directory/hub for information and resources that builds off the *Binational.net* webpage. Merging siloed information and data, integrating, and crosscutting across all agencies and stakeholder groups will go a long way in improving the overall process. We hope our recommendations provide additional detailed guidance for the draft Lake Superior LAMP and look forward to further consultation and engagement on future plans in Lake Superior and other Great Lakes.

Yours in Conservation,



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