



***MEDIA RELEASE - Scientific uncertainty underpins disagreements about sustainability of Lake Winnipeg fisheries. New approaches to stock assessment hold promise for a collaborative approach to resolve it.***

**North Bay, ON (December 20, 2019) – Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre enters into research agreement with Pioneer Commercial Fishers of Manitoba**

Recreational and commercial fisheries on Lake Winnipeg face challenges when it comes to the available evidence for making management decisions about appropriate harvest levels. In similar situations worldwide, collaborative approaches that respect scientific, local and traditional knowledge are increasingly used to address the uncertainty that threatens to undermine both ecological and economic viability.

The Pioneer Commercial Fishers of Manitoba (PCFM) has entered into an arm's-length agreement with the Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre (A/OFRC) to engage researchers experienced with fisheries stock assessment and management on the Laurentian Great Lakes and elsewhere. PCFM aims to support and participate in nonpartisan research and education to increase public awareness of issues on Lake Winnipeg. Based on their knowledge, fishers disagree with impending changes to regulations that they say will put their livelihoods at significant risk. Following dissolution of a co-management arrangement with government earlier this year, fishers gave A/OFRC a free hand to look into whether it is possible to use new ways to assess the state of the fishery in order to explore the consequences of changes to gear.

“The situation on Lake Winnipeg today resembles Lake Erie in the early 2000s”, said Peter Meisenheimer, General Manager with the A/OFRC in North Bay, Ontario. “Anglers, commercial fishers and decision-makers disagreed about risks to fish populations. With scientific uncertainty adding to already difficult business decisions, fishers’ backs were to the wall. They invested in arm’s-length research, just as PCFM is doing now.” Since 2010, recreational and commercial fishers on Lake Erie collaborate successfully in a transparent, science-based system for recommending harvest policies to assure sustainability.

“In other ways, the situation on Lake Winnipeg is more challenging”, said Kevin Reid, A/OFRC board member and project lead. “On Lake Erie, there were more data to work with. As is often the case, governments faced with pressing needs in education and health aren’t able to commit the resources needed to conduct up to date stock assessments and management in a complex multi-species, multi-user fishery,” Reid added, “but this is where commercial and recreational stakeholders can step up.”

Commercial fishers have begun by committing to develop a log-book program, common in other fisheries, to record information that will aid stock assessment and decision-making. The need to collect such information was identified in the 2011 Lake Winnipeg Quota Review Task Force report. Even while new data are being collected, advances in statistics, stock assessment and simulation modelling can use sparse data in better ways than prior approaches. The A/OFRC research team is optimistic that government will share what data do exist, as also happened on Lake Erie. The team includes Yan Jiao, a fisheries science professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and a leading expert in the latest approaches to stock assessment and evaluation of management options.

“Things have come a long way since media reports from Lake Erie were blaming commercial harvest for angler dissatisfaction,” observed Tom Nudds, a conservation ecologist at the University of Guelph. “With the help of independent researchers, the parties learned together that under the present management system, changes in fish abundance result more from environmental factors than from harvest”. The same arguments are floating about Lake Winnipeg and the A/OFRC team looks forward to testing them. “There are no guarantees that we will learn that things are the same on Lake Winnipeg as on Lake Erie, but we do hope we can move the conversation in helpful ways. It begins with a stock assessment and, to the extent possible, a look into the effects of changes to mesh size that are of special concern to commercial fishers right now.”

**Further inquires can be directed to**

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