

# Study shows slim chance Lake Winnipeg commercial fishers overfished pickerel

By Patricia Barrett

A study that was commissioned and paid for by the members of the Pioneer Commercial Fishers of Manitoba (PCFM) shows there's a slim chance that fishers on Lake Winnipeg overfished pickerel stocks, contrary to what the provincial Conservative government and the Manitoba Wildlife Federation have been saying over the past few years about imperilled stocks.

PCFM represents all of Lake Winnipeg's commercial fishery communities, apart from two First Nations. As 90 per cent of the fishers on the lake are Indigenous, PCFM works closely with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs.

PCFM president Einar Sveinson, who lives in Gimli, said both organizations have been trying to get the provincial department of Agriculture and Resource Development [ARD], which is responsible for the commercial fishery, to acknowledge the findings of the third-party study, which was carried out by the Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre (A/ORFC) from North Bay, Ont., and published last June.

"We have been trying to get a meeting with the department for about a year with help from [AMC] Grand Chief Arlen Dumas. The government changed the mesh size on us and bought up our quotas, saying the reason was the pickerel stock was in terrible shape," said Sveinson by phone last week. "But we proved through A/ORFC that wasn't the case. The scary part is A/ORFC used the same data [as the province] but came to the conclusion that there was a one per cent chance we overfished the pickerel population."

The A/ORFC report, titled *Assessment of population dynamics and fishery status for Lake Winnipeg Walleye (Sander vitreus), Sauger (S. canadensis) and Lake Whitefish (Coregonus clupeaformis)*, is available to the public on PCFM's website. It assesses 2019 populations of walleye (also called pickerel), sauger and whitefish.

"Overall, the walleye fishery was strong in 2019. Biomass was high at ~69% of the carrying capacity, the risk that overfishing occurred was 1%, and the risk that the population was overfished was 6%, the result of stable biomass in the north basin and recent increases in biomass in the channel and south basin, combined with reduced commercial catch. The fishing mortality rate in 2019 was the lowest in the time series since the early 1970s," states the report (page 48). The researchers also determined that whitefish was "good" but sauger "less robust."

PCFM was formed a few years ago

to replace the former Lake Winnipeg Fisheries Co-Management Board — a board composed of fishers and provincial fisheries officials. Fishers had voted to voluntarily dissolve the board because they felt the province had been acting unilaterally and ignoring their concerns.

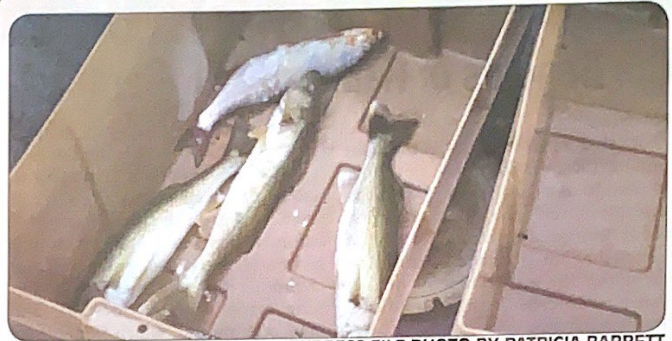
Along with its commercial fishing quota buy-back, the provincial government implemented new mesh sizes on Lake Winnipeg that took effect in spring 2020, claiming pickerel was on the verge of collapsing.

Fishers in the north basin must use a three-and-three-quarter-inch net. Fishers in the south basin were prohibited from using their traditional three-inch or three-and-a-quarter-inch nets, forced to adopt a three-and-a-half-inch mesh size. The larger mesh means they no longer catch a size of pickerel demanded by the restaurant and hospitality sector, their primary market.

"With regard to the new regulations, the hardship on fishers is totally unacceptable. Not only did fishers not have nets to use that were three and a half [inches], but net companies had nothing in stock to sell us because of the speed at which this was enforced, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic complications with production," said Sveinson. "To add insult to injury, the government not only threatened [our livelihood] by not letting us use nets we've used for the last 100 years, but also offered top dollar to [any fisher] that would like to sell out [their quota] before the mesh changes took effect."

In September 2020 the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, in collaboration with PCFM, wrote to the provincial government, asking it to review its fisheries regulatory regime in light of the A/ORFC's findings.

"This report is superior in methodology and data than that provided



EXPRESS FILE PHOTO BY PATRICIA BARRETT

Pickerel and whitefish caught in 2018 by a Lake Winnipeg commercial fisher

through the Lake Winnipeg fisheries assessment program and management systems administered through the province of Manitoba," states the joint letter to the government.

It goes on to say that the report "clearly establishes" that there are some similarities but also "drastic" differences between the analyses conducted by the research team and the results published by the province. It said pickerel is "well established" and the status of those stocks, as well as whitefish stocks, are sufficient to start the process of eco-certification.

In 2019 PCFM commissioned economists at Meyers Norris Penny to undertake a review of the commercial fishery's contribution to the Manitoba economy. MNP said the fishery contributes about \$90 million annually to the economy with over triple that in economic spinoffs.

Commercial fishers contend that the provincial Conservatives have an agenda to build up the recreational angling industry and its tourism-generating dollars at the expense of the commercial fishery and fish food production.

PCFM sent a lengthy letter to agriculture minister Pedersen and Premier Brian Pallister's office last Thursday, asking again for a meeting, raising concerns about the "crippling" mesh size changes and citing a serious conflict of interest with regard to the former director of the Manitoba Wildlife Federation (MWF), Rob Olson, having been appointed by the government to oversee the commercial fishery.

"When you made all of these crippling changes to our industry, with the quota buy-backs and the mesh size change, we welcomed anybody to peer review the A/ORFC study conducted, and presented it to you with no response," wrote Sveinson and PCFM vice-president Raymond Smith in the April 22 letter. "It seems the ARD department would rather put their heads in the sand and continue pushing the MWF's agenda."

The Express contacted the province, but it did not provide a response to questions. The Express also reached out to the AMC.

## For Sale in Vogar, MB

34 Main Street – REDUCED TO \$45,900

3 beds, 1 bath, 960 sf, built in 1977

66 Main Street – REDUCED TO \$54,900

3 beds, 1 bath, 1,008 sf, built in 1991

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES TO THOSE WHO QUALIFY

To view or to see if you qualify, please contact:

Trevor Jaworski, Manitoba Housing  
204-451-3960 or 1-855-201-4624

Manitoba 

## WE RENT THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT FOR SPRING CLEAN-UP

DETHATCHERS 



TILLERS 

AERATORS 



YARD VACS

AND MUCH MORE!

Husqvarna STIHL HONDA ECHO TORO

STRINGER RENTALS SALES & SERVICE

99 7<sup>TH</sup> AVE GIMLI  
204-642-7490