



Michigan B.A.S.S. Nation



Dedicated to Youth, Conservation and Bass Anglers of Michigan

Web Site: <http://www.michiganbass.net>

Dan Kimmel, Conservation Director

PO Box 27424, Lansing, Michigan 48909 Phone: 810-433-2277 Email: djkimmel@greatlakesbass.com

April 21, 2013

Michigan B.A.S.S. Nation
Michigan Bass Season Change Proposal

Michigan B.A.S.S. Nation desires the State of Michigan, Michigan Department of Natural Resources to provide additional bass fishing opportunity with no closed season[^] for largemouth and smallmouth bass by changing General Hook and Line Regulations for bass to the following new regulations:

1. Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass Catch-and-Immediate-release statewide[^] on all waters including Great Lakes and Great Lakes Connecting Waters – January 1 through the Friday before Memorial Day.
2. Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass Catch-and-keep statewide[^] on all waters including Great Lakes and Great Lakes Connecting Waters – Saturday before Memorial Day through the December 31.

[^] **Exceptions:**

- a. Bass fishing is closed on inland trout and salmon waters during their closed season dates since fishing is prohibited for all species on those waters – see the latest Michigan fishing guide or Michigan.gov/fishingguide for applicable waters.
- b. Michigan-Wisconsin Boundary Waters – see the latest Michigan fishing guide or Michigan.gov/fishingguide for Michigan-Wisconsin Boundary Water Regulations for waters covered and the largemouth and smallmouth bass season for those waters.
- c. Sylvania Wilderness Area – bass fishing is closed before the last Saturday in April or after October 31. Statewide bass season applies from the last Saturday in April through October 31 though largemouth and smallmouth bass must be returned immediately to the water and may not be possessed on the special provision lakes of the Sylvania Wilderness Area – see Sylvania Wilderness Area Regulations in the latest Michigan fishing guide or Michigan.gov/fishingguide for details and a list of waters.
- d. Fishing, bass season or possession differences defined in Exceptions to General Regulations by County in the latest Michigan fishing guide or Michigan.gov/fishingguide.

Approved:

Authorized Signature:

Paul Gahr STATE PRESIDENT

Date:

4-21-13

Having discussed closed seasons with anglers and fisheries biologists alike, including MDNR staff, it is time for many good reasons to increase fishing opportunity in Michigan – ex: see Hunting and Fishing License Package Development Work Group Final Report, Wheatlake et al (2006). Angler attitudes and behavior have changed. Even attitudes of some MDNR fisheries biologist have changed away from using closed seasons. Largemouth and smallmouth bass are an obvious candidate considering 83% to 90% of Michigan bass anglers state they voluntarily release most of the bass they catch (87% of charter guides and 92% of bass anglers on Lake St. Clair) – Schneider et al (1991), Thomas (2013). Many studies demonstrate that most other fisheries regulations targeted at bass will have little effect with such a high voluntary release rate already being practiced other than to withhold fishing opportunity. Of course, statewide closed seasons for bass are rare nationwide with only 4 states now having statewide closed bass seasons – Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Maine.

Many dedicated bass anglers and fisheries biologists know and understand why this is the case. There have been many studies that have looked at bass fishing year-round and/or during the spawn trying to correlate it to population level effects. None has succeeded in making a direct connection due to all the known factors that affect bass populations, many of which are not in control of fisheries regulations. This is one important reason so few states completely withhold bass fishing opportunity. Gwinn and Allen (2010) recently looked at population-level effects of fishery closures during spawning for largemouth bass including modeling of Northern populations based on Wisconsin and Michigan DNR data. Their study is very helpful for understanding the causes and effects of trying to manage bass with closed seasons verses allowing more angler effort of various types in North and South populations of varying harvest and capture levels.

And though older studies have stated anglers will oppose reinstating more restrictive fisheries regulations even when a fishery shows signs of serious trouble, the evolution in angler attitudes in practical situations demonstrate that is no longer always true. Examples the past few years include:

- Ohio bass anglers demanding the ODNR reduce opportunity by moving from an open bass season to a catch-and-release only during the approximate bass spawn on Lake Erie though study data did not support that this would improve bass fishing on Lake Erie;
- Illinois DNR changing bass fishing in many streams and rivers from open to catch-and-release only;
- Minnesota DNR changing their statewide smallmouth bass fishery to catch-and-release only after Labor Day based on one study of the movement and possible susceptibility of river smallmouth bass.

What Michigan B.A.S.S. Nation (MBN) feels are most important now are concerns over declining angler participation, fishing license sales and a budget the MDNR can count on to continue to operate. MBN supported the new license fee package to start addressing some of these concerns. We feel the MDNR needs to partner with all anglers and promote more fishing opportunity to begin to address some of the other critical challenges to managing our natural resources. We do not feel bass, in particular, are overharvested or over-pressured even though bass are consistently the first or second most popular sought fish in Michigan. We have abundant water, habitat and forage in general. We can see in our own tournament results how bass fishing in general has gotten better now than it has been in most of our adult lives on many Michigan waters.

We realize bass are pretty good at taking care of themselves. They don't need stocking or the types of assistance harvest fish like walleye and perch might need sometimes, or the stocking and complicated regulations various trout and salmon fisheries need. What we do need is the ability to go fishing for them more often. Bass fishing is a major natural resources economy source as evidenced by US Fish and Wildlife survey data. Michigan is losing out in a significant way by limiting bass fishing.

This will not hurt our bass populations. It will be beneficial to getting anglers started fishing earlier in the year – we have been told that the earlier in the year an angler is able to pursue his/her desired fish species, the more likely that angler is to not skip buying a fishing license that year. Beneficial to dedicated bass angler – MDNR relationship and partnering – the MDNR needs more anglers fishing more often. Beneficial to intra-angler

relationships by reducing the annual intra-angler infighting that does not help create an atmosphere conducive to getting more people fishing. Beneficial to our very important natural resource economy – we have a vast number of quality bass waters – we need to keep anglers in Michigan and attract more out-of-state anglers, many who are not familiar with closed seasons, to keep their natural resources tourism dollars spent in Michigan rather than surrounding states.

This is how one dedicated Michigan bass angler put it – he also happens to be a fisheries biologist – If the MDNR wants to increase license sales and tourism, open the USA's best bass lake to bass fishing year-round (Lake St. Clair was just named the number one bass lake in America by Bassmaster magazine). Walleye are open to possession fishing year-round on the same water that bass have a closed season on despite walleye and bass having similar numbers of available catchable fish while bass having a very low annual harvest rate and walleye are almost exclusively harvested. What is the rationale for that?

It's not mainly scientific to limit bass fishing in Michigan with closed seasons, or to have a later regular bass opener on Lake St. Clair. Even MDNR fisheries biologists have said so. In the study *Distribution and population dynamics of smallmouth bass in Anchor Bay, Lake St. Clair*. (Fisheries research report: 1944) by W. C. Bryant and K. D. Smith (1988) – “The most effective means of increasing yield, at least short-term, would involve changing the SCDRS bass season, which does not open until the third Saturday in June, 4 weeks later than anywhere else in Michigan. The late season opening unquestionably deletes the most effective period of bass exploitation. There is no scientific basis for deciding that Lake St. Clair bass need more spawning season protection than populations anywhere else in Michigan.”

We know the bass fishing is much better now on Lake St. Clair than it was in 1988 despite the increase in popularity with bass anglers and bass tournament anglers. We also know that many more anglers are voluntarily releasing the majority of the bass they catch – up to 90% per the MDNR including 87% released reported by charter captains in 2012 per M. Thomas, T. Wills (2013).

Michigan bass fishing isn't about yield anymore. It is about more opportunity – allowing more angler effort. That's what many Michigan bass anglers and the MBN want. We appreciated the last Saturday in April change in 2006 but why not allow Michigan (and visiting anglers) the opportunity to bass fish whenever they can go? Think of all the fishing licenses bought in March last year when we had the early hot spell. Think how many more could have been sold and how much more angler effort with the accompanying natural resource economy boost Michigan could have gained if it were legal to fish for bass during that time. At the 2013 outdoor shows I asked quite a few general anglers if they would have taken advantage of that opportunity if it had been legal and almost all of them said yes.

Spring fishing is very good, and often more accessible to a larger variety of anglers from shore to boat anglers. Accessibility is a significant factor for people in deciding to buy a fishing license and go fishing. The affordability and having a better chance at catching fish are more important to lower income anglers. Angler recruitment and retention are critical to the future of our Michigan fisheries. Dann et al (2008), *A Survey of Lapsed Anglers* (2010)

In general, MBN does not support regulations that withhold fishing opportunity for reasons such as:

- a. Making enforcement easier for other problems - ex: claimed problems of anglers saying they are fishing for one species while 'targeting' another – don't punish the many because of the few;
- b. Having our seasons approximate other states/provinces bordering seasons – ex: opening Lake St. Clair bass later than the rest of Michigan to be closer to Ontario's bass season. We have to question why Indiana border lakes aren't open all year to bass fishing if this is an important and necessary rationale?
- c. Managing problem waters and populations by limiting all waters to less fishing – managing to the lowest common denominator we call this. A lot more Michigan fishing opportunity would be possible if we

allowed more liberal fishing on the more numerous good waters and handled the few problem waters/populations with special regulations. The MDNR and/or now, the Natural Resources Commission already has the authority to enact spawning closures and scientifically necessary fisheries regulations, allowing them to protect populations that may be marginal, and though anglers prefer simpler regulations they have shown they are willing to accept exceptions when they appear to be scientifically necessary.

Now-retired MDNR fisheries researcher James C. Schneider told us years ago that the only fisheries regulation that Michigan has tried for bass that has any possibly demonstrable correlation to an improvement in the bass population is the move to the 14 inch size limit (on inland waters in 1993, and the Great Lakes in 1995). So few states have a closed bass season because of all the available study data on bass and bass anglers. The following statements are from the Minnesota DNR who has a closed bass season despite being aware of available study data (<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/fish/bass/biology.html> on bass biology):

- Largely because of the male's fastidiousness in building and guarding the nest, many fry survive, and a few adult bass can quickly populate new waters. In fact, researchers have found no correlation between the number of spawning bass and the subsequent number of young-of-the-year fish. The success of the spawn depends entirely on good spawning areas and stable weather.
- As with the largemouth, research on smallmouth has shown no relationship between the number of spawning fish and the success of the spawn. The strength of the year class depends solely on water conditions - in particular, the absence of a sudden cold snap or muddy floodwaters that can kill eggs and fry."

Even MDNR studies support this: "Generally, there is no close relationship between the number of adult bass and the number of fingerling recruits they produce" (Latta 1974, 1975). "Only six adults per acre can produce excessive numbers of fingerlings" (Schrouder et al. 1989; Mraz 1964)." "Generally, anglers are unable to catch every bass, or even enough bass to harm recruitment" (Bennett 1972).

Add to the Michigan bass fishing scene the introduction of invasive species prior to the 14 inch size limit change with the clearer water and additional food source of round gobies, and large numbers of bass tournament results show increasingly larger bass population with larger bass in general, even despite the additional 5 to 8 weeks of legal spring catch and release bass fishing that has existed in Michigan statewide since the last Saturday in April 2006 (May 15 in the Upper Peninsula).

Reviews of various online Michigan bass tournament weights show as good or better bass fishing on many lakes now than previously recorded back into the 1980s. Ex: October 9, 2010 – team of Scott Dobson and Kyle Green bring in the known Lake St. Clair 5-bass record weight of 29.68 pounds. (Note: Most Michigan team bass tournaments have voluntarily reduced their 2-person team creel size below the legally allowed 10 bass starting in the late 1990s.)

Average bass size for winning weights prior to the introduction of invasive round gobies and the change to the 14 inch bass size limit was less than 2 pounds/bass on most inland lakes while slightly higher on larger Northern inland lakes and the Great Lakes. It was rare to see a winning weight for 5 bass over 15 pounds in the mid to late 1980s except on a few choice waters. On some Northern Michigan big lakes, averaging winning weights were around 3 pounds/bass with big bass of the event usually going to a fish less than 5 pounds into the early 1990s.

Looking at Michigan Division Bass Fishing League (BFL) tournament results from 1995 through 2012 provide some idea of the improvement in bass fishing in Michigan (<http://www.flwoutdoors.com/bassfishing/bfl/schedule/>). These are individual tournaments with 2 anglers per boat who are fishing against each other and everyone else. The average weights in 2-person team tournaments tend to be even higher. Individual draw tournament results would be closer to the results of good, dedicated

bass anglers. The Michigan BFL events have consistently involved over 100 to up to 368 anglers per event. They have fished many of the same lakes in SE Michigan, West Michigan, East Michigan and North Michigan multiple times over the years with only a few changes.

Over 23 events from 1995 until September 1998, no one weighed in a winning catch of 5 bass over 20 pounds. Only 1 big bass winner went over 6 pounds, with only 7 out of the other 22 big bass award winners over 5 pounds – 3 of those coming in 1998. Winning weights in West Michigan (Muskegon Lake, Grand River) events ranged from 10 pounds 3 ounces (all of these are for 5 bass) to 15 pounds 13 ounces – under 13 pounds average per win. Winning weights on the East side (Saginaw Bay, Lake St. Clair, Lake Erie) ranged from 15 pounds 6 ounces to 19 pounds 11 ounces averaging under 19 pounds per win.

On 9/13/1998 an angler won a BFL event for the first time with 5 bass weighing over 20 pounds – 20 pounds 13 ounces. That was on the Detroit River. It had happened in a few other events but was still uncommon at the time. 1999 saw 1 more 20 plus pounds win but average West Michigan wins went over 13 pounds and average East Michigan wins went over 19 pounds. Plus, 4 of the 6 big bass awards were for bass over 5 pounds with 1 over 6 pounds. The smallest was 4 pounds 13 ounces from the Grand River.

From 2000 until 2005, 20 plus pound wins and weights became more common – 29 times in 36 events – the biggest being 23 pounds 7 ounces for 5 bass. Average winning weights for West Michigan were almost 14 pounds while average winning weights for East Michigan was a little over 19 pounds.

Legal spring catch and release was added in 2006. 2006 also saw the first time the BFL went to the far North to Burt and Mullett Lakes. That June 2006 event saw 12 limits weighed over 20 pounds in one day. 19 more limits over 20 pounds were weighed in the other 5 events in 2006. Two big bass awards were for bass over 6 pounds and two more over 5 pounds. The 2007 season had very similar results.

2008 was when things really exploded. The first event at Burt and Mullett Lakes saw 31 limits brought in over 20 pounds including a massive winning weight of 27 pounds 5 ounces and big bass of 7 pounds even. 30 more limits over 20 pounds were brought in the rest of the year including another 1 over 25 pounds at the Detroit River. Big bass were all over 5 pounds with 2 over 6 pounds.

2009 saw 65 limits over 20 pounds weighed in including 35 at Burt and Mullett Lakes in one day lead by a 27 pounds 13 ounces winning weight. A Detroit River event was won by a 26 pounds 15 ounce 5-bass limit. The smallest big bass award in 2009 went to a 5 pounds 11 ounces fish with 2 over 6 pounds – the biggest a 6 pounds 13 ounce smallmouth bass.

There were 87 limits over 20 pounds in 2010 – 2012 (18 events), 6 big bass awards over 6 pounds, 1 7-pounder and the rest all over 5 pounds except 2 events on the Grand River in Grand Haven were both big bass awards went to 4 pound 14 ounce bass. All the events were in Northern Michigan or Eastern Michigan except these 2 Grand River events. Though the weights were much lower in West Michigan it still took almost 15 pounds to win both of these events, and the top 20 anglers in these 2 events still weighed in almost as much as used to win these events in the mid-1990s. It is averaging almost 22 pounds to win an event on the East side while the last 3 Northern events all took almost 28 pounds to win. That's 5 bass.

Having been involved in bringing state level events to Burt and Mullett Lakes back in 1991, I can say from firsthand experience the original winning average weights were only 3 pounds per bass with a 4 pound 8 ounce bass being the average big bass winner. Around 2000, it was taking 4 pounds per bass average to win. It approached a 4.4 to 4.8 pounds per bass average heading into 2006 – 2007 before jumping to the present 5.5 pounds per bass average winning weight. I've been fishing the same rocks every year since 1991 and it has been amazing to see the bass keep getting bigger and bigger despite fishing pressure that, while still relatively

low, was almost nonexistent prior to 1991. What is real interesting is seeing more and more 20-plus pound 5-bass limits weighed in on inland lakes over the past 8 years including some catches over 25 pounds from lakes less than 1,000 acres in size despite the continuing popularity of bass fishing and bass tournament fishing in Michigan – ranked about 4th nationally in number of events per Kerr, Kamke (2003).

What may be even more telling about the improvement of Michigan bass fishing despite fishing pressure, bass tournaments, invasive species and adding more legal spring catch-and-release bass fishing is looking at the yearly averages for total weight for the 20th place cutoff in each event. In 1995, it took only an average of 6 pounds 9 ounces to make the top 20. For 2008 to 2012, it has averaged 16 pounds for 5 bass to make the top 20 of these events yearly. Until 2006, the top 20 yearly averages ranged from 10 pounds to a little under 13 pounds with only 1 year top 20 average over 13 pounds. Since 2006, all the yearly top 20 average weights have ranged from 14 pounds 10 ounces to 17 pounds 9 ounces. You can also view the total weigh in results and see many more anglers weighing in at least 1 bass in most events, and many more 5 bass limits than in the earlier years.

I mention the bass tournament results data above as examples of not only the lack of harm to our bass fisheries with the existing fishing pressure and practices, but even no evident correlation to additional spring/spawn fishing legalized in 2006 considering the Indiana DNR recently used tournament results comparisons to state the bass populations and fishing in their Northern natural lakes is as good as ever by looking at a 10 year period – Jed Pearson (5/2/2013).

Schneider's 91-6 Results of Early Season, Catch-and-Release Bass Fishing at Six Lakes (Schneider, Waybrant, O'Neal 1991) on the original 6 test catch-and-release lakes demonstrated the trends in bass angler and angler behavior and attitudes, and supported the previous studies that exist in Michigan and elsewhere. Though he took the somewhat more conservative route still that has been the way of the MDNR in the past by stating more caution, he also stated sufficient results had been obtained to cancel additional sampling while verbally telling us we already knew what we would find out – we can fish for bass during the spring, during the spawn, all year without wiping out our bass just like all the other states who allow this such as our next door neighbors Indiana and Ohio.

Despite a few later claims that the 91-6 study was flawed, the state of Pennsylvania felt the study was valid, using it in their determination to replace their closed bass season with a year-round combination of catch-and-release and catch-and-keep - discussion with Bob Lorantis (2004). The state of New York took a similar path to year-round bass fishing after reviewing available study data, summarized by James R. Jackson and Thomas E. Brooking, Cornell Biological Field Station - Early Opening of Black Bass Fishing Seasons in New York State: A Review of Issues and Available Data (2004).

There exists plenty of data to support some type of statewide year-round bass fishing in Michigan (with a few local exceptions). Many persons seem to recognize that Michigan's natural resource economy would be much better off keeping our anglers fishing and spending in Michigan, while attracting more natural resource economy-boosting angling tourism. Allowing legal year-round bass fishing with the amount and quality of waters we have would almost certainly accomplish more of that.

References:

1. Michigan Department of Natural Resources Work Group, Frank Wheatlake, Work Group Chair, Natural Resources Commission. Hunting and Fishing License Package Development Work Group. Final Report November 9, 2006.

2. Schneider, J.C., J.R. Waybrant, and R.P. O'Neal. 1991. Results of early season, catch-and-release bass fishing at six lakes. Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Fisheries Division, Technical Report 91-6. Ann Arbor.
3. Thomas, M., MDNR Lake St. Clair Fisheries Station: Based on creel survey data for Lake St. Clair from 2002 to 2004 (MDNR unpublished data), anglers released over 90% of the smallmouth bass they caught each year. We suspect that this pervasive practice of catch and release among smallmouth bass anglers resulted in non-reporting of many tagged fish because anglers don't see the jaw tag, or do not want to stress the fish by taking the time to read the tag.
4. Daniel C. Gwinn, Micheal S. Allen. 2010. Exploring Population-Level Effects of Fishery Closures during Spawning: An Example Using Largemouth Bass. School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Transactions of the American Fisheries Society 139:626–634, 2010, DOI: 10.1577/T08-089.1
5. National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation Survey (US Census Bureau, for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006, 2001, 1996).
6. Black Bass Fishing in the U.S., Addendum to the 1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (US Census Bureau, for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1996).
7. Shupp, B. D. 1979. 1978 status of bass fishing tournaments in the United States—a survey of state fishery management agencies. Fisheries 4(6):11-19.
8. Schupp, B. D. 2002. The B.A.S.S. perspective on bass tournaments: a 21st century opportunity for progressive resource managers. Pages 715–716 in D. P. Philipp and M. S. Ridgway, editors. Black bass: ecology, conservation, and management. American Fisheries Society, Symposium 31, Bethesda, Maryland.
9. USFWS Fishing Licenses Sold by State by Year.
10. Bryant William C., Smith, Kelley D., 1988. Distribution and Population Dynamics of Smallmouth Bass in Anchor Bay, Lake St. Clair. MDNR Fisheries Research Report No. 1944.
11. Bassmaster Magazine 2013 Best Fisheries in the Nation listing. Based on consultation with state agencies catch rate reports, and surveys of federation tournament results, members, outdoor writers and industry professionals.
12. Thomas, M., Wills, T., 2013. Status of the Fisheries in Michigan Waters of Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair, 2012. MDNR.
13. Dann, S. L., Alvarado, A., Palmer, D., Schroeder, B., Stephens, M. 2008. Angler Participation, Recruitment, and Retention in Michigan, 1995–2004: Using Data-mining Techniques for Customer Relationship Management. MDNR.
14. Southwick Associates Inc for the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. 2010. A Survey of Lapsed Anglers.
15. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Bass Biology. <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/fish/bass/biology.html> on bass biology

16. Latta, W. C. 1975. Fishing regulations for smallmouth bass in Michigan. MDNR, Fisheries Research Report 1834, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.
17. Latta, W. C. 1975. Dynamics of bass in large lakes. Pages 175-182 in R. H. Stroud and H. Cleppers, editors. Black bass biology and management. Sport Fishing Institute, Washington, D.C., USA.
18. Mraz, D., S. Kmiolek, and L. Frankenburger. 1963. The largemouth bass: its life history, ecology and management. Wisconsin Conservation Department, Publication 232, Madison.
19. FLW Outdoors, Bass Fishing League, Michigan Division, bass tournament results 1995 – 2012. <http://www.flwoutdoors.com/bassfishing/bfl/schedule/>.
20. Kerr, S. J., and K. K. Kamke. 2003. Competitive fishing in freshwaters of North America: a survey of Canadian and U.S. jurisdictions. *Fisheries* 28(3):26–31.
21. [DNR] Tournaments don't harm bass fishing, Press Release 5/2/2013, Jed Pearson, Indiana DNR fisheries biologist.
22. James R. Jackson and Thomas E. Brooking, Cornell Biological Field Station - Early Opening of Black Bass Fishing Seasons in New York State: A Review of Issues and Available Data (2004).