



CANYON FERRY RESERVOIR AND HAUSER RESERVOIR

PROPOSED FISHING REGULATION AND PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY

Fisheries management in the Missouri River reservoir system is guided by the Upper Missouri River Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan. The plan outlines fisheries management goals and strategies for Canyon Ferry, Hauser, and Holter Reservoirs and river sections from Toston to Canyon Ferry and Hauser Dam to Holter Reservoir. Fisheries monitoring in 2020 found that walleye population trends warranted regulation changes on Canyon Ferry Reservoir and Hauser Reservoir based upon criteria outlined in the management plan.

Fish population trends in all the plan waterbodies were discussed with a commission appointed Citizen Advisory Committee in December 2020. At that meeting the department discussed management alternatives to consider regarding walleye management on Canyon Ferry and Hauser. All members of the CAC supported adjusting walleye regulations to 10 fish daily, only 1 over 15 inches, possession twice the daily limit.

After the December CAC meeting the department requested additional public input on the proposed change. The public was asked to provide comment on changing the Canyon Ferry walleye regulation from 20 fish daily, only 1 over 20 inches, possession is twice the daily limit, to 10 fish daily, only 1 over 15 inches, possession is twice the daily limit. Comment was also requested to change the Hauser walleye limit from 20 fish daily, only 1 over 25 inches, possession is twice the daily limit, to 10 fish daily, only 1 over 15 inches, possession is twice the daily limit.

The intent of the proposed changes on both reservoirs is to maintain walleye relative abundance near current levels while focusing angler harvest on over-abundant smaller sized fish to improve population size structure.

The department collected comments via email and on the FWP website from February 23 through March 15. The department received 152 comments on proposed changes in the reservoirs. Most commenters supported the proposed changes (78.9%), while 4.6% opposed the changes and 16.4% offered other ideas or alternatives (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of results of comments for proposed walleye regulation changes in Canyon Ferry Reservoir and Hauser Reservoir.

	Number comments (%)
Approve	120 (78.9%)
Oppose	7 (4.6%)
Other	25 (16.4%)
Grand Total	152

Summary and Response to Comments in Support

Many commenters in support simply stated their support for changes without providing additional commentary. Additionally, there were a number of commenters that supported the change, but also supported additional restrictions (such as lower bag limits or different length restrictions). A sample of some supporting comments and the department's response is found below.

Sample comments:

Comment 1: *10 fish only one over 15" is a step in the right direction. You have to force most fisherman to keep the smaller fish or they will just upgrade every time they catch a bigger one. It's encouraging to see some significant attempt at changes as what we have been doing for the last 20 years has not worked very well for a healthy fishery.*

Comment 2: *I'm ok with it but should either wait till next year or should of been put in this year's regs.*

FWP Response: Due to printing deadlines and timing of sampling, data evaluation and public input could not be completed prior to printing of the 2021 Montana Fishing Regulations. The department will publicize and post any adopted regulation changes.

Comment 3: *I wholeheartedly support the suggested implementation of reduced bag limits and only 1 fish over 15 inches. I would like to see it taken a step further, I suggest lowering the limit of harvest on Hauser to 5 fish daily and 1 over 15". There has been an unprecedented increase in recreation due to the pandemic and I worry that Hauser and Lake Helena walleye populations will not be able to handle the increased pressure.*

FWP Response: Despite high recreational pressure, the department believes that a higher than standard daily bag limit is needed to maintain walleye population abundance at levels to maintain a quality multi-species fishery.

Summary and Response to Comments in Opposition

Comments in opposition were largely concerned with lost opportunity to harvest desirable sized fish or voiced concerns about walleye negatively impacting the trout fishery. Below is a sample of comments and the department's response.

Sample comments:

Comment 4: *Protection of the Walleye in these reservoirs should not be done at the expense of the trout population in the rivers that flow into them. Please do not change these regulations if they are detrimental to the trout in the Missouri River.*

FWP Response: Goals and strategies outlined in the management plan strive to maintain quality trout and walleye fisheries in the reservoirs while considering impacts to adjacent waters to the extent possible.

Comment 5: *I am writing to oppose the proposed regulation changes for walleye in Canyon Ferry and Houser Reservoirs. To argue against the proposed size limit, I will use quotes from your own biologists which were published in your agency's magazine. In the May-June 2020 issue of*

Montana Outdoor Magazine, the article "Walleye start receiving the catch-and-release treatment" there is a quote from FWP Fish Biologist Heath Headly. It reads, "What usually limits walleye numbers and average size is spawning habitat and decent water levels, not the lack of eggs." This comment refers to the growing trend of releasing larger fish to protect spawning-sized individuals and/or the shaming others who do not follow the practice. By changing the size limit to one fish above 15 in. per day, you would be reducing harvest opportunities as a whole while at the same time, not making any changes to the factors (spawning habitat and water levels) that limit average size. Additionally, the new regulation would perpetuate the attitude that it is the angler's fault, not habitat, that are contributing to smaller size fish. In the same article, Adam Strainer, FWP fisheries biologist in Helena states, "Canyon Ferry's walleye population could benefit from far more harvest..." and "If anglers want to see more fish over 20 inches, they'll have to start keeping a lot more of those little guys." These statements seem directly contradict the proposed reduction in daily limit from 20 to 10.

FWP Response: The department recognizes the restrictive length regulation removes opportunity for anglers to harvest larger sized fish. The intent of the proposed change is to reduce the number of small fish while maintaining walleye abundance near current levels. If the regulations work as intended, more fish will recruit into larger, more desirable, size groups, and less restrictive regulations can be evaluated. Higher bag limits previously in place were effective at reducing walleye abundance, but not enough small fish were harvested to influence growth to larger sizes.

Comment 6: My opinion and I think I share this with the people I fish with is we want some walleye to eat. A walleye under 15" hasn't got much meat on it. I can understand a less fish limit but don't think only one over 15" is reasonable. I'll go fish somewhere else if that is the rules.

FWP Response: See response to Comment 5.

Summary and Response to Other Comments

Other comments supported a variety of themes, but the most common involved consideration of other bag limits or restrictions or stocking or enhancing the forage base. A sample of comments and the department's response can be found below.

Sample comments:

Comment 7: First, thank you for offering to receive public input and to look at ways to improve the walleye fishery. I've only been actively fishing walleye on CF for 5 years. But, grew up near Fort Peck and watched a proactive approach to management help turn that body of water into a world-class fishery. I feel the same could happen for this mgmt area. I would actually like to see a daily limit of 5 walleye with option to keep one over 18". A date blackout in April, not allowing walleye fishing, would maximize reproduction success. I say this based on what I see successful mgmt practices do in other states such as MN. Additionally, I fished for walleye during this time last year and witnessed nearly 100 boats a day, on weekends, targeting breeding areas and having great success. Last, I would love to see more aggressive mgmt practices regarding forage. This topic is the greatest challenge to fishery development, in my opinion. Whether it be

some sort of forage minnow such as a fathead minnow or yellow perch, a stocking program would really energize your efforts.

FWP Response: Reducing the bag limit and implementing additional length restrictions could compromise the management goal of maintaining a quality multi-species fishery. Management goals are set at levels appropriate to balance walleye abundance with available forage. Spawning habitat, survival of fry, and angler harvest during the spawn are not currently limiting walleye survival. High rates of survival and recruitment of juvenile fish year after year is the primary factor for continued recurrence of small fish. See response to Comment 9 below for additional discussion regarding forage species.

Comment 8: Manage for larger fish, it always helps the fishery when a population of fish have at least 25 percent of larger and older fish. Not to mention that 10 fish is plenty for most anglers for food.

FWP Response: The management plan has goals in place to maintain a Proportional Stock Density (PSD) between 30-60. PSD's within this range typically indicate a well-balanced size distribution consisting of multiple size classes of fish. The intent of implementing a restrictive length limit on Canyon Ferry and Hauser is to increase PSD's into goal ranges.

Comment 9: Our fishery is in need of food. Walleyes crawling along the bottom with the perch for blood worms is not ideal. The walleyes are undernourished and skinny. I purpose a small minnow be introduced as a source of food. The trout, perch and walleyes would all benefit. I also purpose the introduction of Bluegills and black crappie. Both are excellent gamefish that would bring fisherman in.

FWP Response: Management plan goals were set with the intent of maintaining population abundance appropriate for available forage. Additionally, the plan gives priority to increase current forage species to support the principle game fish. Previous evaluation of forage introductions has shown that risks associated with a new species introduction outweigh potential benefits. Consequently, no new species will be evaluated or considered for introduction into the management plan area.

Bluegill are already present in Canyon Ferry but are expected to only maintain abundance at low levels. Crappie would be expected to perform similarly.