

Large take may close season early

Board votes, 7-0, to enact emergency harvest cap

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This year's Lake Winnebago sturgeon spearing season may be closed early if and when spearmen take a specified number of this unique fish.

The Natural Resources Board, at its meeting in Madison last week, unanimously enacted an emergency rule establishing a harvest cap for this year's sturgeon spearing season, which had been scheduled to run Feb. 13-28. The vote was 7-0.

The length of this year's spearing season will depend on factors such as weather, water clarity and spearing pressure.

But Bob Manwell, public affairs manager with the De-

partment of Natural Resources in Madison, said: "If this rule had been in place last year, the season would have closed in three to four days."

"There's always a big push (of spearing pressure) on opening weekend," Manwell said. "If there's really ugly weather, the season may last awhile. But if there's nice weather and the water is clear — and reports indicate that it is — then it could be an early closure."

The board set caps for three categories of sturgeon, under which spearmen could take 400 adult female sturgeon 55 inches or longer, 400 younger females 36 to 55 inches, or 2,150 males. Under the emergency rule, the season will be closed the day after 80% of the cap in any of the categories is reached.

"The sturgeon registration stations will tally the number

of sturgeon taken each day," Manwell said. "That information will be collected by our fisheries staff. When the total reaches 80% of the cap in any of the categories, at 6 p.m. the following day, the closure would go into effect."

The Lake Winnebago System is widely known as home to the largest lake sturgeon population in the world. However, there are serious concerns among fish managers and others about the future stability of the fish.

DNR fish managers, working with the Winnebago Citizens Sturgeon Advisory Committee, had sought the caps because of concerns that too many sturgeon, especially mature females, were being speared.

"While the overall number of sturgeon in our population remains relatively high, we have seen the size and age composition of our adult females decrease to a seriously

low level," said Ron Bruch, DNR sturgeon biologist in Oshkosh. "We need to take action now to maintain our sturgeon stock and the sport of sturgeon spearing over the long haul."

Sturgeon do not quickly recover from over-harvest, since they mature at an old age. Female sturgeon, which can live 80 to 100 years and reach weights of up to 200 pounds, first spawn at age 20 to 25 and then spawn only every four or five years. Males, which live 40 to 45 years and can reach 60 pounds, first spawn at age 12 to 15 and every other year thereafter.

Four record sturgeon spearing harvests on Lake Winnebago since 1990 resulted in other harvest restrictions between 1992 and 1997, including shortening the season from 16 to nine days in 1996. Another high harvest last year prompted the call for the emergency rule.

The board also approved including a question on permanently establishing the same spearing caps for public vote at the spring conservation hearings in April.

In addition, the board approved including another related question at the hearings on whether a two-day sturgeon spearing season on the upriver lakes — Butte des Morts, Winneconne and Poygan — should be held in February 2000 and every five years thereafter.

The upriver season, which is held once every five years, is currently scheduled for 2001. Fish managers want to hold the season a year earlier to obtain harvest data for sturgeon population estimates throughout the Lake Winnebago System.

If the two questions are approved, permanent rule changes could go into effect beginning in the year 2000, Manwell said.