

Federation, watershed coalition express frustration with striped bass rules

KRIS MCDAVID | Miramichi Leader

April 10, 2017

Share this article



Facebook



Twitter



Email



People fishing striped bass along the Miramichi River off the Nelson shoreline last spring. The New Brunswick Wildlife Federation and Miramichi Watershed Management Committee say the federal government's new management plan for the 2017 season falls short.

Photo: Kris McDavid/Miramichi Leader

Add members of the New Brunswick Wildlife Federation to the growing list of organizations who believe the federal government's management plan for striped bass in the Miramichi River system this season doesn't go far enough.

The federation, which advocates on behalf of New Brunswick's hunting and fishing community, responded to the new regulations announced by Fisheries and Oceans Canada late last month that allow for a slight increase in the daily retention limits for anglers in 2017.

While the government is doubling the length of the striped bass season in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence region, which includes the striper-rich Miramichi River watershed, critics of the decision said the action being taken by federal officials doesn't go far enough to address what they say is an overabundance of bass.

Charles LeBlanc, the president of the New Brunswick Wildlife Federation, said his members are discouraged that many of the suggestions presented during a recreational fishery committee with Fisheries and Oceans officials in December had fallen on deaf ears.

His organization, along with groups like the Miramichi Salmon Association and the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee, had been calling on the government to commit to allowing anglers to keep three bass per day in order to level off the exploding bass population that has inundated the Miramichi in recent years.

The government's plan, however, will cap the daily bag limit at just one fish for the majority of the season, with anglers allowed to keep two from June 15 to Aug. 31.

Fisheries and Oceans are also barring and fishing in the striper's traditional spawning grounds on the Northwest Miramichi River from Whitney up to the Red Bank Bridge from mid-May to mid-June, another measure LeBlanc says is unnecessary.

"This area has been open to fishing under the same regulations as the rest of the Gulf area in previous years and the stock numbers continue to grow each year," he said. "Therefore, we believe that there is no science to support such a closure."

LeBlanc added that there was no discussion of closing down that section of the river during the meeting held with department representatives in December.

If there were any concerns about being able to fish there heading into 2017, he said he would have hoped it would have been brought up during that meeting so that any coinciding data could have been presented to stakeholders and ultimately discussed.

We are unaware of any such science and do not understand why the area should be closed," LeBlanc said. "We request that the Northwest area be open for fishing as it has been in the past."

Many anglers who fish the Miramichi regularly believe that the striper population is officially out of control, and have been calling for looser restrictions on the species during the recreational fishing season.

While the bass were listed as a species of concern by the Government of Canada back in the '90s, when numbers had dipped to all-time lows, the fish has enjoyed a remarkable turnaround over the last number of years.

So after previously being off-limits to anglers, the government moved in 2013 to open the striped bass in the Gulf region up to a limited retention season that allowed fishermen to keep a single fish of a certain size during a handful of pre-authorized weeks established for the year.

Even with a loosening of those restrictions, the number of bass heading up the Miramichi these days is believed to be higher than ever before, measured at just under 320,000 spawners by Fisheries and Oceans last year.

The rise in the bass population has coincided with a steep decline in the number of returning Atlantic salmon being recorded within the Miramichi.

That has led to suggestion from everyday anglers that the bass could potentially be viewed as one of the primary culprits behind the lower salmon counts, however government staff have said there's no evidence to suggest that.

While there are different schools of thought about how the government should be dealing with this, there seems to be a consensus on a local level that there are simply too many bass right now.

Debbie Norton, who operates the Upper Oxbow Outdoor Adventure Lodge on the Little Southwest Miramichi and serves as president of the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee, said she strongly believes the numbers could have easily justified a daily bag limit of three bass this season.

"Conservation groups were unanimous in asking for a bag limit of three striped bass per day with a possession limit of six throughout the Gulf region – this request was based on the science of abundance of which there has been high numbers in the past few years," she said in a statement.

Norton also noted she was disappointed the department opted to keep in place the upper slot – or size – limits on any bass that are bagged this season.

Anglers must still release any hooked fish that measures below 50 centimetres in length or above 65 centimetres.

"We felt that with such excessive numbers in the Gulf that this was no longer required," Norton said. "[This is] again based on science and the principle of harvest based on abundance."

Other organizations, meanwhile, such as the newly-formed Coalition for Better Salmon Management, are calling for more extreme measures, including an unlimited cap on recreational striper catches and opening the species up to a commercial fishery.

Fisheries and Oceans staff, along with Miramichi-Grand Lake MP Pat Finnigan, who serves on the federal fisheries standing committee, have cautioned that a careful approach is the best way to ensure the population remains healthy.

A piece published on the department's website states there is "no evidence to support the view that striped bass cause low numbers of Atlantic salmon," and the theory that killing more bass will help the salmon population is "ill-informed."

The 2017 striped bass season will come into effect on April 15 and will last all the way through to Oct. 31.

Share this article



Facebook



Twitter



Email

2 Comments

Telegraph Journal

MIRAMICHI SALM... ▾

♥ Recommend

🔗 Share

Sort by Best ▾