

May 16, 2007

Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia virus (VHS) was recently discovered in inland waters of Wisconsin (in the Lake Winnebago/Fox River system), where it caused a large die-off of freshwater drum. VHS causes internal and external hemorrhaging in fish and can lead to death. To date more than 30 species of fish have been found to be susceptible to VHS, including brown trout, rainbow trout, chinook salmon, and coho salmon. Currently, many important questions surrounding VHS remain unanswered, including information on the virulence of VHS in different fish species. However, other varieties of VHS than we have in the Great Lakes have been known to cause large scale fish kills.

Until the recent VHS discovery in inland waters of WI, the disease had essentially been found from maritime Canada, through the St. Lawrence seaway, in Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair, and at the top of Lake Huron by the Lake Michigan boundary. While the spread of this new aquatic invasive virus appears eminent and non-preventable, it is desirable to slow its spread to the extent possible. This would allow additional time to further our understanding of this new threat and identify possible management options for dealing with it.

In recognition of the potentially severe and widespread ramifications of this new virus, the Senate Committee for Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs convened on Wednesday May 16, 2007, and included in their agenda a special discussion of the VHS issue. Committee Chair, Senator Patricia Birkholz provided an introduction to the urgency and potential severity of this new fisheries threat. She provided poignant perspective on; VHS as the latest in a long list of aquatic invasive species, the ongoing threat of ballast water from Great Lakes shipping, the economic contribution of fishing to Michigan's economy (~4.5 billion dollars annually), and the continued risks and costs to our fisheries from aquatic invasive species. Kelley Smith, Chief of Fisheries for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) provided background information on the disease, its spread into the Great Lakes, and the actions being taken by the MDNR to deal with VHS and future fish diseases, as well as answering many questions about VHS from committee members. Michigan Council of Trout Unlimited members Carl Heuter and Bryan Burroughs provided comment on the topic, providing support for the actions being taken by the MDNR in reaction to this specific virus, and stressing the importance of continued proactive work towards preventing the continued introduction of future invasive species into the Great Lakes. The Senate Committee solicited recommendations from Kelley Smith on how they might be of assistance with this issue, and provided an open invitation for him to provide updates on VHS in the future.

For more information on VHS, and the actions being taken by the DNR to inhibit the spread of this disease visit www.michigan.gov/dnr/fishing.