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Sault Tribe's Stocking Program Strengthens Michigan's Walleye Fishery *Summer 2022 walleye stocking brings tribe's total to 19 million*

SAULT STE. MARIE, Mich.—The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indian's Walleye Stocking Program released 2.1 million walleye this year, 1 million fry and over 1 million summer fingerlings, from its walleye rearing ponds in the Eastern Upper Peninsula and Northern Lower Peninsula. Making a major impact on local fisheries, the tribe's program has stocked nearly 19 million walleye fingerlings throughout the Great Lakes, inland lakes and the St. Mary's River since 1995.

The program has two walleye rearing ponds and an experimental whitefish pond in use. The program broke ground on a third walleye pond June 27.

This year, 380,779 summer fingerlings were stocked in the St. Mary's River at five sites: 20,208 in the Sault area, 99,206 in Lake Nicolet, 80,327 in Lake George, 60,708 in Raber Bay, and 120,330 in Potagannissing Bay.

Elsewhere in northern Michigan, 647,762 fingerlings went to: Cheboygan River (151,532), Epoufette Bay (78,605), St. Martins Bay (305,135), Waishkey River (29,314), Caribou Lake (43,010), Frenchman's Lake (7,919), Tahquamenon River (24,946), Culhane Lake (5,070), Pretty Lake (1,217), and Beaverhouse Lake (1,014).

Released in the first few days after hatching, half of the 1 million fry went to Tahquamenon River and the other half to Millecoquins Lake. Sault Tribe Fisheries Enhancement Coordinator Rusty Aikens said walleye are marked for tracking at three days old, so survival rates and other population data can be collected.

The summer fingerlings were 1.75 inches on average this year. Some research shows 10-15 percent of summer fingerlings make it to adulthood. "The exact percentage of the survivability is not known, but the general consensus is that the larger they are at the time of release the higher the rate of survival," Aikens said.

He added, "Walleye are stocked at this size and age because they are just about to switch their diet from zooplankton to eating other fish. To raise them longer would require a steady supply of minnow, which can get very expensive. The summer fingerling stage provides a 'best bang for the buck.'"

Aikens said walleye stocking has proven to be very helpful to the fishery. "The percentage of the walleye caught in the St. Mary's River that originated in our hatchery is approaching 50 percent," he said.

Aikens said they also provide walleye fry and support to local ponds where the tribe has arrangements in place, such as a pond on Drummond Island that was originally built by the Drummond Island sportsman club and is now being maintained by Mike Fairchild and his family.

Sault Tribe Natural Resource Lead Fisheries Biologist Brad Silet said the Sault Tribe fishery is an important resource for the Great Lakes and surrounding areas. He said, "Walleye play a crucial role in our subsistence and commercial fishing activities, not to mention the large impacts it has on our local communities that love to catch walleye."

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