



February 2020

## The Road to Change – Fisheries Management in Alberta

The Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA) has increasingly been concerned about the Government of Alberta’s approach to fisheries management over the last number of years. The limited focus, lack of meaningful consultations, communication short comings, coupled with risk aversion has led to frustration in the angling community. Compounding this is a narrow application of science, digitised decision-making process and failure to use all fisheries management tools available.

The reality is that fisheries in Alberta like elsewhere in North America are subject to risk. Risk metrics are only one factor that needs consideration. Alone they should not be the driver of management actions that need to balance environmental, social and economic variables. Going forward the direction must be able to demonstrate the following can occur in concert:

- Sustainable fish populations
- Habitat protection
- Angling opportunity
- Distribution of angling pressure
- Understandable angling regulations including objectives

Recently there appears to be renewed hope that recognition of the need for change in the direction of fisheries management in Alberta has gained a foothold. During the winter of 2017/18 the angling community’s frustration boiled over related to the direction of fisheries management in Alberta including the lack of meaningful consultation and involvement.

To put this into perspective, one must go back to August of 2016. Then AFGA President Wayne Lowry sent a letter to the Honorable Premier Rachel Notley *“calling on the government to set up an external, independent, multi-disciplinary panel .... to evaluate whether the current direction of fishery management in Alberta is meeting its societal, economic and environmental responsibilities”*. Fast forward to the fall of 2017. Concerns from anglers rolled in after attending public information sessions related to the *Northern Pike and Walleye Management Frameworks* and the *North Central Native Trout Recovery Program*. This resulted in a second letter by then AFGA President Doug Butler to the Honorable Shannon Phillips that asked, *“the Government of Alberta to put on hold planned changes to angling regulations for 2018 related to these plans”*.

This led to a meeting with Deputy Minister Andre Corbould of Alberta Environment and Parks with AFGA. What occurred behind the scene is unknown, but the result was the Honorable Shannon Phillips making a surprise appearance at the AFGA 2018 Annual General Meeting (AGM). She addressed the delegates committing to put on hold the angling closures along the Eastern Slopes that were part of the *North Central Native Trout Recovery Program* until there was further review of the science and other concerns addressed.

Concurrently the Alberta Fish and Game Association developed a guidance document titled *“Redefining Fisheries Management in Alberta - Call for change from the Alberta Fish and Game Association”*. This document was shared with the angling community, Government of Alberta and endorsed at the Alberta Fish and Game Association Annual Conference in February 2018. Along with AFGA resolutions, positions statements, policy, supported by ongoing discussion within the AFGA Executive and membership, this has become the basis for further discussions with the Government of Alberta.

One of the outcomes was the creation of the Fisheries Stakeholder Advisory Committee (FSAC). In May of 2018 the Fisheries Stakeholder Advisory Committee met for the first time. While a range of topics were broached, the focus was on the Minister’s commitment for an *“independent third party review”*. A *Third Party Scientific Review of Alberta Environment and Park’s North Central Native Trout Recovery Program* was completed in October of 2018. The completed report was *“embargoed”* within the Government of Alberta and not shared with the Fisheries Stakeholder Advisory Committee until March of 2019.

A provincial election call occurred at this time. Following the election, there was a period of transition as the United Conservative Party took over the reigns of government from the New Democratic Party. The new Minister of Environment and Parks, the Honorable Jason Nixon along with UCP caucus committees undertook extensive consultations with stakeholders related to the direction of Fish and Wildlife management in Alberta that extended into the fall of 2019.

During this transition period, the *Third Party Review* continued to be embargoed within the Government of Alberta until it was released publicly in August of 2019. The findings of the report identified both strengths and weaknesses in the North Central Native Trout Recovery Plan. The communication and consultation processes were flawed was a major conclusion. The consensus is this report and meetings with stakeholders by the new Minister of Environment and Parks and the UCP Caucus Committees led to a major rethinking of both the structure of the ministry and direction. The Minister’s Vision for *“Fisheries Management in Alberta”* was released as a cornerstone of engagement sessions and online consultations in January 2020 related to *“opportunities for more recreational fishing”*. The Minister has indicated that the results of these consultations will be reflected in the 2020 Alberta Guide to Sportfishing Regulations. While the results have not been made public, talking with those that attended the open houses or completed the online surveys, the feedback appears positive. Hoping that by the 2020 AFGA Conference in Sherwood Park from February 20 to 22 that will have a clearer picture of what changes are on the horizon.

The Honorable Shannon Phillips ministerial commitments marked a pivotal turning point in the relationship between the angling community and the Government of Alberta. *A Third Party Scientific Review of Alberta Environment and Park's North Central Native Trout Recovery Program* identified both shortcoming and strength of science including serious communication and consultations issues related to fisheries management in the province. Under the UCP government this relationship has been strengthened further as signs of “real change” are happening. For the first time in decades there is a Minister in charge of AEP willing to make structural and policy change to how fish and wildlife is managed in Alberta. Indications are that internally within Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) Fish and Wildlife Division many embrace this renewed focus on fish and wildlife in the province.

This however does not reverse the past. The question that is unknown is will such consultations lead to real change in the overall direction of the fisheries management in the province? For this to occur all ministries within the government of Alberta must be on the same page along with anglers, stakeholders, and the public. For once it would be nice to prove the nay-sayers wrong. The scuttle-butt is that some in the bureaucracy view this exercise as only about creating a few more fishing opportunities in the province rather than obtaining the needed social license for overall direction going forward.

### **Moving Forward**

Following is an outline of the direction the AFGA is advancing in its ongoing consultations with the Government of Alberta. They reflect past positions but have been updated as new information and ideas have been introduced into the discussion. For brevity, background information is brief and major points have been summarized or condensed. There are five topics, organized chronologically as themes overlap (A)B)C)D)E).

We are looking for your input. Are we on the right track? What have we missed? Do we have your support?

This overview leads into the five recommendations and actions being advanced by AFGA. The last page is the survey. Appreciate everyone attending the conference to fill out the survey so that the AFGA can represent your collective viewpoint. We recognize that there will be divergent viewpoints and other options identified. These will not be lost. Critical thinking is an ongoing process which implies carefully weighing input to determine what changes or additions maybe required. For questions please direct them to Darryl Smith, AFGA Provincial Fish Chair.

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## **A: Review of key elements of decision-making process related to fisheries management in Alberta**

There are many elements of the decision-making process that did not go through a third party science review. It is the opinion of AFGA they were developed without the needed stakeholder input at the outset. Some of these elements have as their basis extreme risk aversion which will continue to impact the ongoing direction of fisheries management in the province. The Government of Alberta made a decision not to proceed with further third party science review as was originally envisioned. This was due to monetary constraints and need to implement change expeditiously. This has created a gap. This gap needs to be addressed as it will continue to impact the overall direction within fisheries management which is predicated on obtaining the needed public support. Therefore, the following need further discussion and input at a stakeholder level:

- Fish Sustainability Index (FSI)
- Standardized monitoring protocols (Fall Index Netting; Stream Sampling protocol; Other monitoring protocols including use of citizen science)
- Northern Pike and Walleye Management Frameworks
- Species at Risk (public engagement, plans, criteria, and listing process)
- Native Trout Recovery Plan (public engagement, plans)
- Fish management objectives

All of these are tools or planning steps that directly integrate into overall decision-making process. What is the science that supports the tools and defines limitations? Are the criteria, benchmarks, regulatory options, additive or multiplicative which further entrenches an extreme risk perspective? Did the public or stakeholders have a role in establishing the benchmarks? The Third Party Science Review identified these as major areas of concern. It is imperative that there be broad public support for the benchmarks, criteria, and actions. This currently does not exist.

The AFGA Executive is recommending that an independent round table of key stakeholders be convened to review and provide input into benchmark determination and subsequent use of the various models and tools.

## **B: Key actions required for comprehensive management of coldwater fish species (Native and Naturalized Trout Species, Mountain Whitefish, Arctic Grayling)**

The following direction is being advanced by the Alberta Fish and Game Association. The aim is to develop a comprehensive plan at the broad landscape level that deals with issues such as indirect mortality associated with catch and release angling, habitat change, shifting angling pressure, angling opportunity, compliance, and enforcement. At the same time, it recognizes the need for local and prescribed actions at a watershed level.

The Alberta Fish and Game Association document “*Redefining Fisheries Management in Alberta - Call for change from the Alberta Fish and Game Association*” along with resolutions, position statements, policy, ongoing discussion within the AFGA Executive and membership have identified these as key actions as they relate to coldwater fisheries management in Alberta. Please refer to the documents for greater detail and reasoning.

Each recommendation is linked to the following AFGA priorities and referenced with a superscript as noted below:

- Sustainable fish populations <sup>a</sup>
  - Habitat protection <sup>b</sup>
  - Angling opportunity <sup>c</sup>
  - Distribution of angling pressure <sup>d</sup>
  - Understandable angling regulations including objectives <sup>e</sup>
1. Current Fisheries Zones would be combined and have revised boundaries to represent two primary habitat zones (Coldwater and Coolwater) <sup>abe</sup>
  2. Protecting, enhancing and restoring habitat is the cornerstone of ensuring the long-term sustainability of fisheries <sup>ab</sup>
  3. Naturalized and native coldwater fish species would both be priorities for fisheries managers and trade-offs transparently disclosed <sup>abcde</sup>
  4. Integrated planning processes to deal with access management would be completed as linked to habitat, illegal activity, and angling pressure concerns <sup>abcde</sup>
  5. Environmental education, communication and awareness would be part of any ongoing plan <sup>ab</sup>
  6. Angling education that addresses fish identification, proper handling and release of fish, aquatic invasive species and disease spread, fishery management, angling regulations, ethics, and environmental stewardship would be an integral component of overall action plan in the coldwater habitat zone <sup>abcde</sup>
  7. *Stewardship License* implemented tied to mandatory angling education for enhanced harvest opportunities or as a component of the Native Trout Recovery Plan <sup>acd</sup>
  8. Creating angling opportunity offsets as a result of more restrictive angling regulations must be a priority <sup>abcd</sup>
  9. Species at Risk Recovery Strategies (Bull Trout, Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Athabasca Rainbow Trout) would be incorporated into a single action plan on a province-wide basis <sup>abce</sup>
  10. In addition to Sportfishing License, consideration of a *Coldwater Fish Stamp* to support habitat initiatives or development of alternate fisheries is proposed <sup>abe</sup>
  11. Use of additional fisheries management tools such as citizen science, land disturbance threshold limits, water/flow thresholds, fish stocking and enhanced enforcement must be expanded <sup>acd</sup>

### **C: Sportfishing Regulations require simplification and indication of long-term management intent throughout the Coldwater Habitat Zone**

There is a need for sportfishing regulatory changes to deal with the long-term sustainability of both native and naturalized coldwater fish populations. These fish populations are under threat due to a cascade of cumulative effects.

To accomplish this there is the need to simplify the format of the current Alberta Guide to Sportfishing Regulations. The proposed Coldwater Habitat Zone would largely be captured by combining existing Fish Management Zone 1 – Eastern Slopes (consists of 4 watershed units) and Watershed Unit NB2 of Fish Management Zone 3 – Northern Boreal. There would be common regulations for most waterbodies in this new zone. For example, currently there are over 100 waterbodies showing multiple site-specific regulations beyond those that are covered by province-wide regulations in ES1 Watershed Unit alone. This is confusing, complicates enforcement and compliance and does not align with regulation simplification objectives. Classification of watersheds to encapsulate management intent and objectives is not intuitive under current format.

The classification of waterbodies would communicate the long-term management intent, objective, and potentially species. The *Conservation (Default)\** regulations apply to both naturalized and native coldwater species. Similar conservation based regulations would be developed for the Coolwater Habitat Zone where the dominate species are Lake Whitefish, Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger, Goldeye, Burbot, and Yellow Perch (discussed later).

While the expectation is *Conservation (Default)* regulations would apply to most fish populations found in the Coldwater Zone, this does not preclude *Site-specific* regulations if warranted. These *Conservation (Default)* regulations are analogous to the current province-wide default regulations but applied more broadly. A recovery objective is not included as should be considered part of an action plan, not a fish management objective or classification system. Classifying waterbodies by their management goal at the outset reverses the narrative to positive outcomes. The classification system has been developed in a way that transparently defines the intent to anglers, public, and other stakeholders.

The AFGA is proposing the following classification system. The system would apply to native and naturalized fish populations that are self reproducing. *Put and Take* represents fish populations that are maintained through stocking and have limited or no natural reproduction.

- Conservation (Default – Coldwater Fish Species)\*<sup>acde</sup>
- Conservation (Default - Coolwater Fish Species) <sup>acde</sup>
- Site-specific (Refuge and Biosecurity; Experimental Study; Harvest; Blue Ribbon/Quality) <sup>acde</sup>
- Put and Take (Province-wide) <sup>cde</sup>

The AFGA is proposing the following *Conservation (Default – Coldwater Fish Species)\** regulations in the Coldwater Habitat Zone:

1. Artificial lures only – No Bait <sup>ae</sup>
2. Single hook barbless <sup>ae</sup>
3. Year-round open seasons for mainstems, lakes, and other designated waterbodies <sup>acde</sup>
4. June 1 to October 31 open season on tributaries <sup>ae</sup>
5. Catch and release only for all coldwater species <sup>acde</sup>

The above does not preclude the application on an emergency basis of the following:

6. Spot closures or daily angling hour restrictions for high water temperature conditions, disease outbreak, or environmental disaster <sup>ae</sup>

It is recognized that there may be a few regionally or provincially significant coolwater fish populations in this new Coldwater Habitat Zone. In addition, these coolwater species do cohabitate some waterbodies. Single hook barbless and artificial lure only regulations have been proposed throughout the new zone as the priority is the management of Trout, Mountain Whitefish, and Arctic Grayling. Successful live release of these species is critical as the alternative are total closures to angling. The redrawing of management boundaries will help with this overlap issue and the option to be managed under *Site-specific* classifications exist. There will be many waterbodies managed under the *Put and Take* classification in the zone, as a category they will have their own unique regulations similar to what is currently in place.

#### **D: Key actions required for comprehensive management of coolwater fish species (Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger, Goldeye, Yellow Perch, Burbot, and Lake Whitefish)**

There is synergy and commonality with the recommendations outlined in **B** and **C**. Differences exist as to risk to sustainability which vary across the province. The reality is risks are not on the same order of magnitude that face our coldwater fisheries generally. Precautionary principles have been applied to benchmarks and thresholds that create a situation where fisheries managers have no risk tolerance (related to issue discussed in **A**). The ability to harvest fish is critical if angling is not to be viewed as just another recreational pastime. Frustration has boiled over in much of the angling community and among stakeholders to current management paradigm.

Except for Lake Sturgeon, none of the major coolwater fish species are listed under either the provincial or federal registries for species at risk in Alberta. The populations of Lake Sturgeon appear to be recovering but this is offset by only a limited range solely in the mainstems of the major rivers within the Saskatchewan River drainage.

The following direction is being advanced by the Alberta Fish and Game Association. Alberta anglers are accepting of highly restrictive sportfishing regulations. They also expect comprehensive plans that deal with the range of issues that are impacting our fisheries

resources and aquatic ecosystems. The recent consultations on “creating fishing opportunity” undertaken by Alberta Environment and Parks are a good first step and starts to address some of the actions advanced by AFGA.

The Alberta Fish and Game Association document “*Redefining Fisheries Management in Alberta - Call for change from the Alberta Fish and Game Association*” along with resolutions, position statements, policy, ongoing discussion within the AFGA Executive and membership, have identified these as key actions as they relate to coolwater fisheries management in Alberta. Please refer to the documents for greater detail and reasoning.

1. Current Fisheries Zones would be combined and have revised boundaries to represent two primary habitat zones (Coldwater and Coolwater) <sup>abe</sup>
2. Protecting, enhancing and restoring habitat would be the critical action in ensuring the long-term sustainability of fisheries <sup>ab</sup>
3. Alignment of land-use planning, Water Conservation Strategy, Wetland Policy, and the Fish and Wildlife Policy with habitat requirements in both white and green zones of the province involving all levels of government must be a priority <sup>ab</sup>
4. Environmental education, communication, and awareness must be part of management actions. There must be multiple delivery points including contemporary education system, within government at all levels including internally, with stakeholders and the public <sup>ab</sup>
5. A modern Angler Education Program (perhaps analogous with the current Conservation and Hunter Education Program) needs to be introduced <sup>abcde</sup>
6. Creating angling opportunity offsets as a result of more restrictive angling regulations must be a priority <sup>abcd</sup>
7. Common fishery management approach throughout the zone coupled to angling regulations simplification <sup>acde</sup>
8. Development of electronic format for sportfishing regulations and information <sup>abcde</sup>
9. Expanded use of fish stocking to supplemental existing populations and/or for recovery purposes and/or establishment of put and take fisheries for both coldwater and coolwater species <sup>acde</sup>
10. The adoption of alternate regulations such as harvest slots, innovative use of tags, and annual limits <sup>acde</sup>
10. Consideration of a license stamp to partially fund programs such as fish stocking <sup>acd</sup>
11. Use of additional fisheries management tools such as citizen science, enhanced riparian protection, water/flow thresholds, fish stocking and enhanced enforcement must be expanded <sup>abcd</sup>

### **E: Sportfishing Regulations require simplification and indication of long-term management intent throughout the Coolwater Habitat Zone**

Fisheries management objectives and regulations must be simplified and transparently communicated as relates to the Coolwater Habitat Zone. These actions mirror those described in C. The primary difference being a greater emphasis on harvest opportunity as part of



sustainable fisheries management. The reality is our coldwater fish populations are under ever increasing threat, largely due to habitat changes brought about by human induced disturbance compounded by climate change. Coolwater fish species do provide an opportunity for harvest. Catch and release angling will still be an important component of fisheries management as it is engrained in regulations such as size limits, tag harvest, and limits. It is also an ethical choice that anglers make to ensure that the opportunity for recreational fishing continues.

There is a need to simplify the format of the current Alberta Guide to Sportfishing Regulations. The proposed Coolwater Zone would largely be captured by combining Fish Management Zone 2 – Parkland Prairie and Fish Management Zone 3 – Northern Boreal. As noted earlier, parts of Watershed Unit NB2 of Fish Management Zone 3 – Northern Boreal would shift to the Coldwater Zone. There would be common regulations for most waterbodies in this new zone. Currently as an example, Northern Pike regulations alone have so many variations on a lake by lake basis within each Watershed Unit that cannot be justified for multiple reasons. Compound this with overlying regulations for other species and a regulatory nightmare is created. This is confusing, complicates enforcement, can not be effectively monitored, and does not align with regulation simplification objectives. Classification of watersheds to encapsulate management intent and objectives is not intuitive under current format.

The classification of waterbodies would incorporate the management intent, objective, and potentially species. Conservation based regulations (default) would be developed for the Coolwater Habitat Zone where the dominate species are Lake Whitefish, Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger, Goldeye, Burbot, and Yellow Perch. The expectation is such regulations would apply to most fish populations in the Coolwater Zone.

Site-specific regulations would be developed for the most important recreational fisheries in this zone. As these lakes support the bulk of recreational angling, they would be intensively managed using multiple tools. It would be expected there would be different regulatory options used to optimize angling opportunity as part of an overall sustainable fisheries management approach. The classification system for waterbodies has been developed in a way that transparently defines their objective to anglers, public and other stakeholders.

The AFGA is proposing the following classification system. The system would apply to native and naturalized fish populations that have are self reproducing. *Put and Take* represents fish populations that are maintained through stocking and have limited or no natural reproduction.

Conservation (Default – Coldwater Fish Species) <sup>acde</sup>

Conservation (Coolwater Fish Species) <sup>acde</sup>

Site-specific (Refuge and Biosecurity; Experimental Study; Harvest; Blue Ribbon/Quality) <sup>acde</sup>

Put and Take (Province-wide) <sup>cde</sup>

The Alberta Fish and Game Association is proposing the following regulations in relation to coolwater fish species. Based on consultations and research it is our belief that conservation objectives can be met through such a framework. Additionally, angling opportunity,

standardization, angling regulation simplification, and reducing risks can be achieved. There is also the benefit of more focused fisheries management based on priority waterbodies and species.

#### Conservation (Default – Coolwater Species) <sup>acde</sup>

- 1) One fish limits for predator species (Lake Trout, Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger, Burbot)
  - a) Walleye/Sauger – harvest slot between 43cm and 48cm
  - b) Northern Pike – harvest slot between 63 cm and 73 cm
  - c) Lake trout – no size limit
  - d) Burbot – no size limit
- 2) Other species
  - a) Lake Whitefish limit and Cisco - 5 in total
  - b) Yellow perch limit - 15 but only 5 over 30 cm in total
  - c) Goldeye and Mooneye – 5 in total
  - d) Lake Sturgeon – 0 in total (C&R only)
- 3) Year-round angling in most waterbodies including mainstems of major rivers
  - a) Tributary streams closed to angling November 1 to May 30
  - b) Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger – no retention March 15 to May 14 (C&R only)
  - c) Lake Trout – no retention September 15 to November 30 (C&R only)

#### Conservation (Default – Coldwater Species) <sup>acde</sup>

- 1) Where range overlap occurs in the Coolwater Habitat Zone – 0 limit for all Trout, Mountain Whitefish, and Arctic Grayling unless a Site-specific regulation is in place

#### Put and Take <sup>acde</sup>

- 1) Trout – all species – 5 in total
- 2) Other species – to be determined or Conservation Default or Site-specific

There will be a range of Site-specific <sup>acde</sup> regulations applied to limited number of waterbodies. For example, while the Lake Trout limit of 1 would be standard, it could be modified with a size limit. On a Site-specific basis the ability to harvest species coldwater species such as Mountain Whitefish when their range extends into this zone would still be possible. Conservation (Default – Coldwater species) overall regulations could be applied to waterbodies containing Native and Naturalized Trout, Mountain Whitefish and Arctic Grayling populations through Site-specific designation of a waterbody or watershed. An example might be the House River Arctic Grayling population south of Fort McMurray or the trout streams in the Cypress Hills. Site-specific regulations would be developed for the most important coolwater recreational fisheries in this zone as noted earlier.

## AFGA Survey on fisheries management in Alberta – February 2020

There is no need to provide your name. We encourage everyone attending to fill out the survey. Please circle your response unless other wise indicated.

1. In which Fish Management Zone do you live? East Slopes, Prairie Parkland, Northern Boreal
2. In which Fish Management Zone do you usually fish? East Slopes, Prairie Parkland, Northern Boreal
3. Which of the following groups of fish do you primarily pursue? Coldwater (Native and Naturalized Trout, Arctic Grayling, Mountain Whitefish); Coolwater (Northern Pike, Walleye, Perch, Lake Whitefish, etc.); Put and Take (Stocked Trout)

### **A: Review of key elements of decision-making process related to fisheries management in Alberta**

Do you agree with this recommendation/direction? Yes No  
Comments:

What is missing or other options:

### **B: Key actions required for comprehensive management of coldwater fish species (Native and Naturalized Trout Species, Mountain Whitefish, Arctic Grayling)**

Do you agree with these recommendations/directions? Yes No  
Comments:

What is missing or other options:

### **C: Sportfishing Regulations require simplification and indication of long-term management intent throughout the Coldwater Habitat Zone**

Do you agree with these recommendations/directions? Yes No  
Comments:

What is missing or other options:

**D: Key actions required for comprehensive management of coolwater fish species (Northern Pike, Walleye, Sauger, Goldeye, Mooneye, Yellow Perch, Burbot and Lake Whitefish)**

Do you agree with these recommendations/directions? Yes No

Comments:

What is missing or other options:

**E: Sportfishing Regulations require simplification and indication of long-term management intent throughout the Coolwater Habitat Zone**

Do you agree with these recommendations/directions? Yes No

Comments:

What is missing or other options:

**F: Please provide feedback related to other issues impacting Alberta's fisheries below:**