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Department of Natural Resources Confirms Spread of Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS) in Great Lakes

Recent analyses of fish sampled from northern Lake Huron have confirmed the existence of viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) in lake whitefish, walleyes and Chinook salmon, Department of Natural Resources fisheries officials announced today. VHS is a virus that causes disease in fish but does not pose any threat to public health.

The analyses that were completed earlier this week establish that VHS has now been confirmed in lake whitefish samples from the Cheboygan area, in lake whitefish and walleye samples from the Thunder Bay area, and in Chinook salmon samples from the Swan River egg-take station near Rogers City.

"The continuing march of VHS through the waters of the Great Lakes is a major challenge to our agency and our management options," said DNR Director Rebecca A. Humphries. "These new discoveries are extremely unfortunate and further highlight the problems created by the constant introductions of new diseases from outside of the Great Lakes region, the speed with which they can spread, and the threat that such pathogens pose to our natural resources."

VHS was detected in lake whitefish from the Cheboygan area after re-analyzing samples collected in 2005 during a survey for bacterial kidney disease (BKD).

"It is not unusual for us to collect fish that have unknown viruses, which typically require a significant effort to properly identify," said Gary Whelan, fish production manager for the DNR. "Once we had indications of VHS in other samples of fish from Lake Huron, this sample was retrieved from storage and fully analyzed by Dr. Mohamed Faisal at Michigan State University."

Samples from the Thunder Bay area were collected last fall during a mortality event that included lake whitefish and walleyes.

"At the time, we suspected that the cause of the mortality might be related to VHS," said Kelley Smith, chief of the DNR Fisheries Division. "Because the fish were so badly decomposed, however, it is still not certain that VHS caused these fish to die since botulism was also a possible cause. But given the detection of VHS and the fact that the mortality occurred during the spawning season both implicate VHS as the probable cause of death of these fish."

A number of Chinook salmon observed at the Swan River egg-take station last fall also showed signs of VHS infection, Whelan said. A standard fish health inspection that is annually conducted by the DNR Fisheries Division on this key broodstock

did document VHS in both female and male fish, including one fish exhibiting clinical signs of VHS. Standard methods for disinfecting the eggs were applied last fall at the egg-take station prior to transfer of the eggs to the state's hatchery facilities. To date, all lots of Chinook salmon hatched from these eggs and being reared in DNR hatchery facilities have been tested and all are negative for VHS, which is attributable to the disinfection methods that have been employed at all the DNR's egg-take stations for many years.

"This shows that our standard disinfection procedures, similar to those used on the West Coast where VHS has been found for a long time, were effective in protecting our hatcheries and the fish reared in those hatcheries," Whelan said.

DNR officials have been in contact with personnel in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services, alerting them to the new confirmations of VHS in Lake Huron fish, and outlining the steps being taken by the DNR in response to this new information.

"In the continued battle to slow the spread of VHS throughout the Great Lakes, we must remain vigilant, take every precaution, and implement all options available to us," Smith said.

Those actions include:

- * Reclassification of Michigan's waters of Lake Huron, including Saginaw Bay, as a VHS Positive Management Area. In addition to Lake Huron, the management area encompasses the state's waters of the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River and Lake Erie.
- * Reclassification of Michigan's waters of the St. Marys River from the Soo Locks to Lake Huron and all of Lake Michigan as a VHS Surveillance Management Area.
- * Sampling efforts for several fish species, including walleyes, emerald shiners and lake whitefish will be significantly increased in the new VHS Surveillance Management Area.
- * Additional testing of all lots of Chinook salmon in the state's hatchery facilities that originated from eggs collected at the Swan River weir will be conducted prior to stocking those fish in the state's waters.
- * A prohibition on the trap and transfer of live fish that are collected from the state's waters of the Great Lakes for management purposes unless the fish have tested negative for VHS.
- * Increased efforts to inform anglers and others about the dangers of VHS, especially to inland waters of the state. Anglers are asked not to move live fish between the Great Lakes and inland waters, particularly minnow species, and to use standard disinfection techniques for boats, live wells and other equipment. See www.michigan.gov/dnrfishing for more information on helping prevent the spread of disease and invasive species on the Great Lakes.

Citizens are encouraged to report sick fish or fish kills to their local DNR office or use the DNR Web site at www.michigan.gov/dnr. Anglers should contact the DNR if they observe fish that exhibit any of the following signs: hemorrhaging in the skin, including large red patches particularly on the sides and anterior portion of the head; multiple hemorrhages on the liver, spleen, or intestines; or hemorrhages on the swim bladder that give the otherwise transparent organ a mottled appearance. This information will help DNR fisheries staff to track VHS and take appropriate management actions to help slow the spread of this virus.

Anglers and boaters can also help prevent the spread of VHS and other viruses or bacteria that cause disease in fish by not transferring fish between water bodies, and by thoroughly cleaning boats, trailers, nets, and other equipment when traveling between different lakes and streams. The use of a light disinfectant such as a solution of one part chlorine bleach to 10 parts water (i.e., one gallon of bleach to 10 gallons of water) to clean vessels and live wells is very effective against VHS and other viruses and bacteria that cause disease in fish. Soaking exposed items such as live wells, nets, anchors, and bait buckets in a light disinfectant for 30 minutes is also an effective method to prevent the spread of a wide range of aquatic nuisance species.

In 2005, VHS was detected for the first time in Great Lakes fish species in the US and Canada, including muskellunge in Michigan's waters of Lake St. Clair and freshwater drum in Lake Ontario. It is not known how VHS was transferred to the Great Lakes region or how long it has been in the waterways of the Great Lakes.

The DNR is committed to conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state's natural resources for current and future generations.

Although viral hemorrhagic septicemia, or VHS, has already been introduced into the Great Lakes ecosystem, they have not yet proliferated our inland lakes. The primary method of introduction into our inland lakes is boating and fishing activities. The virus can be inadvertently carried in live wells or bilge water on boats and in bait buckets.

As with zebra mussels and other invasive species, simple actions taken by boaters can prevent the inadvertent spread of VHS into our inland lakes. Every time you use your boat, make sure you take the following precautions against the next invasion:

- ❖ Inspect every inch of your boat – the hull, drive unit, trim plates, props, anchor, centerboards, etc. – and remove aquatic plants, animals, and mud from the boat and equipment before leaving any body of water;
- ❖ Drain any and all water from your boat and equipment on land before leaving the area;
- ❖ Dump any leftover bait on land, away from water, especially if the live aquatic bait has been in contact with infested waters;
- ❖ Rinse your boat after use, preferably with hot water. If hot water is not available use tap water and then allow it at least five days to dry before entering a new water body.