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Two marine-biologists with the Ministry of Natural Resources acclimated the fingerlings to the lake water before taking out volunteers to deliver roughly 2,500 of them at a time.



Brian Yourth moves walleye from the hatchery truck.

MNR boosts the Golden Lake walleye population with 15,000 fall fingerlings

By Alex Lambert
Staff Writer

Deacon – An ongoing effort to rehabilitate the population of walleye in Golden Lake recently saw a boost thanks to help from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR).

Members of the Golden Lake Property Owners Association (GLPOA) have had their sights set on restoring the species and putting them back at the top of the food chain for just over three years. They took another step towards their goal on Sept. 25th, meeting with marine biologists from

the MNR and members of the White Lake Fish Culture Station to undertake a restocking initiative.

Both organizations teamed up to provide the lake with 15,000 advanced fall fingerlings—a significant contribution—yet it pales in comparison to the millions of rainbow smelt that have plagued the waters for years.

GLPOA Fish Committee Chair Don Bishop said they are thankful for the help, but he's cautiously optimistic the initiatives' success will carry on into the future.

"Typically, the hatcheries like to get their efforts out into lakes as spring

fry, summer or midsummer fingerlings, as it's a lot of extra work and expense to get them to fall fingerlings or yearling stage" he explained. "The unfortunate part is the size of them when they go out. They're still very small and just become breakfast, lunch and dinner for the other fish."

Mr. Bishop described Golden Lake as an anomaly, noting the MNR had told them in past years they had about six million rainbow smelt, but a recent hydroacoustic survey from 2022 by the Harkness marine labs within Algonquin Park revealed the figure is more than twice that. With over 13 million, they're also getting bigger than usual.

"We measured the gape size of the smelt and then we knew that at a certain size for the walleye, the smelt can no longer feed on them," he said. "In the hatchery release or in the wild, the survival rate of walleye is around three percent or just under. By getting them to be fall fingerlings, the survival rate goes up to anywhere between 60 and 80 percent."

Mr. Bishop is not too worried about the survival of the new stock added to the lake but said their offspring don't stand much of a chance against the millions of rainbow smelt. He noted the hatchery had clipped the left pectoral fin off all 15,000 of the new walleyes to identify them as they are caught in the future.

"Those 15,000 are going to have to eat something. They'll go out and start eating some rainbow smelt," he said, "but it's 15,000 going after 13 million. So, it's going to take more than that."

One of the few ways the association knows how things are going is with creel surveys from local anglers collecting information on their catches. He said responses are lacklustre at best, considering that a little bit of extra work is a tall order when your focus is catching fish.

"The accuracy comes when we go out and start to see a change in what takes place," he said, noting it won't be another three years until the new fingerlings are of an acceptable size to catch.

"That's a long way out," he added. "15,000 is a good start—50,000 would have been better, and 50,000 next year and the year after that. You're building up momentum to create a top predator to reduce the rainbow smelt. That's what we need to do."

Mr. Bishop said of the nine fish hatcheries in Ontario, just two have

walleye. He added the ministry has agreed to provide summer fingerlings next July for the speciality designed Floating Fingerling Nursery System (FFNS). The much smaller walleye have little chance of getting beyond the rainbow smelt, but in the FFNS they are protected until they reach late fall fingerling size where they'll have grown to anywhere between 13 and 15 centimetres after 120 days.

"Then they're released into the water that they grew in, so they're already acclimated and used to the surroundings," he said, noting that getting through the winter is their first hurdle.

Mr. Bishop explained that when the water temperature drops to the magic number of 10 degrees by mid-November, the walleye's metabolism begins slowing down to prepare for the colder winter temperatures.

"The unfortunate part with the rainbow smelt is that their metabolism doesn't go down with the cold water because they're voracious eaters under the ice all winter long. That's why it's important to get the bigger ones in there, so they don't become food for the predator."

Mr. Bishop emphasized the key difference between a routine stocking and what the GLPOA is doing, noting they're looking to restore the walleye population to its former glory.

"Rehabilitating means it's an ongoing process. All you're doing by stocking is hoping it works, while what we want to do is get to a level that we're able to do 50,000 a year, at least."

Red Tape and Roadblocks

Mr. Bishop noted one significant issue they've had since starting the initiative is the amount of bureaucracy and red tape, which he blamed on outdated legislation.

"We've had to put up with 37 months of roadblocks," he said. "The legislation written in Ontario to capture and hold aquatic species falls under commercial aquaculture, which there's a whole list of parameters that are required. These are for larger containment systems that hold between 20,000 to 50,000 fish, right through the 2.5 year grow out cycle."

He said anyone holding any sort of aquatic species must possess a commercial aquaculture license but argued it's unfair for the ministry to enforce when they're only in the

water a third of the year and benefiting the natural stocks.

"We've asked the ministry to consider adjusting the legislation to allow for projects like we're doing to move forward, so that we're actually helping rehabilitate the stock. We're not out there harvesting like a commercial farm. We're helping things get back to the way they were," he added, noting it's technically possible, but not without getting everyone on the same page.

Mr. Bishop said the MNR has yet to address the push for new legislation but instead proposed a pilot project where it would monitor the water, and the fingerlings habits moving forward. The data will include everything from growth and mortality rates to the amount of feed the fish consume.

While nothing is set in stone for the MNR to return for another fish stocking the same time next year, once they formulate their longer-term plan GLPOA will have a better idea. Mr. Bishop said the GLPOA fish committee team remains steadfast in its goal to bring the walleye back on top to the way they were in the 1950s through to the mid 1980s.



All 15,000 of the walleye fingerlings had their left pectoral fin clipped off (seen parallel to right thumb) for future identification.



Fish Committee member Jay Foran hoists a net of walleye fingerlings onto the Ministry of Natural Resources boat before distributing them across the lake.



The GLPOA Fish Committee has been working towards rehabilitating the lake's walleye population for a few years now. From left they are Jay Foran, Diana Yourth and her husband, Brian, Don Jones, Marian Zohr and Committee Chair Don Bishop.



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