

Limiting the Use of Baitfish and Roe Helps Slow the Spread of VHS

As anglers across the state are beginning to learn how the presence of viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) in Michigan's waters will impact their fishing activity, nothing in the new regulations announced by the Department of Natural Resources last month has caused as much debate in the angling community as using fish eggs (roe) for bait and the practice of "chumming."

Under General Provision 17 of the new regulations, bait and fish eggs from 32 fish species on the Prohibited Fish Species List can only be released into the water when attached to a hook. The use of single eggs, spawn sacks, and skein is acceptable.

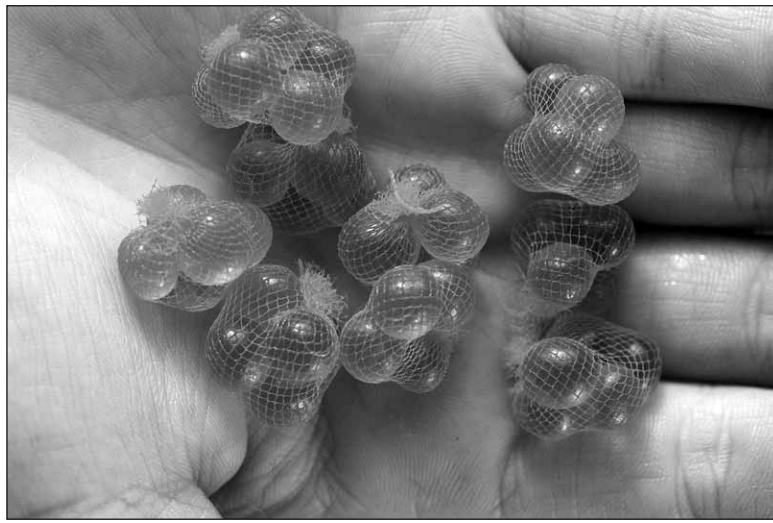
Anglers cannot release baitfish into a water body when done fishing, and should consider disposing of them when leaving the water.

"Since infected baitfish and eggs from infected fish are primary vectors for the transmission of VHS, we could have banned the use of all



Outdoor Matters

A column from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources



The release of large amounts of fish eggs that are potentially VHS-positive is an easy way to spread the virus. By limiting the use of roe, such as the spawn sacks shown here, DNR fisheries managers made a conscious decision to allow most angling techniques to continue, while adopting a reasonable strategy to slow the spread of VHS.

baitfish and eggs from fish found on the Prohibited Species List," said DNR Fisheries Chief Dr. Kelley Smith. "However, we believe that such an action was overly restrictive and unnecessary if anglers would work collaboratively with us to help slow the spread of VHS."

Dr. Smith said General Provision 17 and the other provisions in the order were written from both a scientific and practical basis aimed at controlling the spread of diseases in fish, not on regulating the use of bait or roe.

"Although the DNR cannot stop fish from moving between watersheds, we can limit angler activities in hopes of protecting this state's aquatic resources," said Dr. Smith. "Our intent is to sufficiently slow the spread of the disease so that we can learn how to manage VHS in the future, while minimizing the negative effects on the bait industry and sport anglers."

By choosing to limit the use of baitfish and roe, DNR fisheries managers made a conscious decision to allow the vast majority of angling techniques to continue, while at the same time using a conservative approach to slow the spread of VHS.

But the most common complaint brought up in e-mails, on various Web postings, and through other

contacts and correspondence, is that the order "bans" chumming.

This statement is not accurate.

In fact, the issue of chumming, defined as throwing bait — any type of bait — into the water to get fish to feed, was specifically and intentionally omitted from the order.

"We carefully crafted the wording in General Provision 17 to ensure chumming was not banned," said Jim Dexter, the DNR's Lake Michigan Basin coordinator.

"An angler may continue to fish using various baits and fish eggs as attractants if they are not on the official Prohibited Species List that is maintained on the DNR Web site," he said.

The list of prohibited species, which can be seen at www.michigan.gov/dnrfishing, includes all species in Michigan or connected Great Lakes waters that are either verified as infected with VHS or potentially infected.

"It is important for everyone to understand that the provisions of the order are specifically aimed at slowing the spread of VHS throughout the waters of this state," Mr. Dexter said. "The entire order was constructed on our current understanding of the science behind managing diseases of fish, human behaviors, and risk analysis."

As scientists, DNR fisheries



To slow the spread of VHS, the DNR needs the help and cooperation of every angler. Under General Provision 17 of the new regulations, bait and fish eggs from fish species on the Prohibited Species List can only be released into the water when attached to a hook. The use of single eggs, spawn sacks, and skein is acceptable. (DNR photograph by David Kenyon)

managers fully understand that as the number of potentially diseased fish or eggs introduced into a body of water increases, so, too, does the risk of introducing the disease.

A single egg on a hook is less likely to spread the disease than using a few eggs in a spawn sac. In turn, using spawn sacs is less likely to spread VHS than using a skein of eggs. Yet, DNR managers decided to allow the use of skeins, again to minimize the impacts to anglers and their methods of fishing, while at the same time hoping that anglers would not abuse this technique.

Now add to this scenario the concept of throwing in some larger number of eggs as an attractant.

Clearly the risk of spreading VHS goes up significantly when chumming is added on top of the use of eggs as allowed by the order while fishing. Thus, the risk of spreading the disease through the activity of anglers is lower if those activities are limited, rather than totally unregulated.

"In fact, one of our main goals in issuing the order is to help the public understand fish disease issues, what they can do to help us manage such diseases, and hopefully garner their cooperation to help us slow the spread of VHS for the benefit of all," Dr. Smith said.

Unfortunately, many anglers harvest roe for fishing, and those anglers can and will move great distances with that roe to fish in different areas of the state.

Fisheries managers do not want anglers taking eggs from fish that are potentially infected with VHS in one river, and then using that roe in a potentially uninfected river.

The DNR encourages anglers to share the same conservation principle. Although many anglers believe that VHS has already spread everywhere, it hasn't. Would any angler want to be known as the person who may be responsible for spreading the disease to a new location?

As a whole, most people understand that rules and regulations are designed to protect our natural resources for the long term, maintaining healthy ecosystems for the

use and enjoyment of all citizens now and in the future.

But if the public chooses to ignore the rules, then not only will enforcement be more difficult, but also will the negative effects of the disease increase more quickly, causing greater harm to the state's resources and to future fishing opportunities.

These new fishing regulations will provide the DNR the time necessary to slow the spread of the disease, understand how it spreads and

its impacts on populations of fish, as well as develop a strategy for managing VHS in the future to minimize the potentially devastating effects it might have on our fishery resources.

They also are an education tool to make Michigan's anglers and its bait industry full partners in the fight against fish diseases.

For the most up-to-date information on VHS and other fishing-related topics in Michigan, go the DNR Web site at www.michigan.gov/dnr-fishing.

Newly Adopted DNR Fishing Regulations

Department of Natural Resources fishing regulations are designed to enlist anglers and the bait industry as allies to slow the spread of fish diseases, particularly Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS). The regulations went into effect Thursday, June 28.

The key highlights of the new regulations are:

- The regulations only apply to species on the Prohibited Species List. The key baitfish species for anglers are spottail shiners, emerald shiners, bluntnose minnows, white suckers, and Pacific herring (frozen for cut bait). The key species for fish eggs (roe) are Chinook salmon, coho salmon, brown trout, and rainbow trout/steelhead.

- Bait includes live, dead, frozen, and part or cut bait, including fish eggs (roe).

- Anglers will get a receipt from the bait shop which will tell them where they can use the bait and if it is certified VHS-free, which can be used anywhere in the state.

- Receipts are valid for 7 days.

- Uncertified bait from a bait shop or collected by anglers is restricted on where it can be used. Baitfish from VHS positive waters can only be used on VHS positive waters, VHS surveillance waters baitfish can be used in VHS surveillance or positive waters, and baitfish from VHS-free waters can be used anywhere in the state. The key for anglers is knowing the location of the Disease

Management Areas, and that information will be available at the bait shops and on the DNR Web site.

- Bait and fish eggs can only be used on a hook if they are on the Prohibited Species List. The use of spawn sacks is acceptable. Anglers cannot release minnows when done fishing and must dispose of them when leaving the water. The release of many baitfish or large amounts of fish eggs that are potentially VHS-positive is an easy way to spread the virus, fisheries officials warned.

- When practicing catch and release fishing, you may only release a live fish back into water that the fish can freely swim into from the location it was caught. This applies to catch-and-immediate-release and catch-and-delayed release (tournament) fishing. This will prevent the virus from being transported by live fish to new waters.

- All water must be emptied from live wells and bilges when leaving a body of water. This regulation applies to all boaters and will prevent the virus from being transported by infected water.

In addition, the key highlights for retail and wholesale minnow dealers are:

- There is a certification process that will allow dealers to provide disease-free bait for Michigan anglers. It is a two-stage process that includes both the holding facilities and the baitfish.

- It is not required that baitfish be certified. Certified baitfish can be used anywhere in the state and provides the most options for anglers. Uncertified bait is restricted to where it can be used.

- Both wholesale and retail minnow dealers must tell their customers on their receipts where the baitfish was taken, the lot or transaction code, and what disease management area it can be used.

- Receipts must be kept for one year.

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