

Minnesota Trout Unlimited welcomes MNDNR change in stocking to protect and recover Lake Superior steelhead

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Minnesota Trout Unlimited (MNTU) welcomes today's announcement by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) that it will make long overdue changes in stocking practices in North Shore rivers in order to preserve and rebuild Minnesota's unique wild steelhead fishery, while allowing time for full recovery of the population before any harvest of wild steelhead.

Cessation of kamloops stocking is the only defensible course of action

MNTU especially applauds the DNR's decision to cease the dangerous practice of stocking a domesticated strain of rainbow trout known as "kamloops" which interfere with wild steelhead reproduction and create weak hybrids which undermine steelhead recovery. The results of sophisticated genetic tests from hundreds of adult steelhead sampled during the 2016 and 2017 spawning runs have proven what MNTU has long feared, that kamloops are in fact straying widely and interfering with steelhead spawning in rivers all the way to the Canadian border. Previous research established that steelhead-kamloops hybrids are far less fit than pure steelhead and weaken the steelhead gene pool through genetic introgression. For more information about this research and how hybrids could eventually destroy the steelhead fishery see the article "Saving North Shore Steelhead" on page 10 of the June 2017 issue of Trout Unlimited Minnesota <http://mntu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MNTU-Newsletter-2017-06.pdf>

North Shore rivers below their barrier falls are rugged, harsh environments where only the fittest wild fish can manage to survive and reproduce. Amazingly, Minnesota's wild steelhead populations have survived, and at times thrived, adapting to these harsh conditions over more than 20 generations. From modest initial stockings on the Canadian shore in the late 1800s, naturally reproducing steelhead spread throughout the Lake Superior basin and quickly established self-sustaining populations. The steelhead population which has evolved along the North Shore is now a uniquely adapted, wild fishery unlike any other. Interference with wild steelhead reproduction and reductions in fitness through hybridization by domesticated kamloops will eventually destroy the steelhead population. The DNR's decision to follow the science and cease this dangerous, counterproductive stocking program is the only responsible course of action.

Not relaxing harvest restrictions on wild steelhead

MNTU strongly supports the DNR's decision not to allow harvest of wild steelhead while this fishery is recovering from the adverse impacts of years of interference by hatchery kamloops. Since 1996, the DNR's stated management goal for Lake Superior has been to rehabilitate naturalized (wild) steelhead stocks to achieve a level that will allow limited angler harvest supported by naturally reproducing populations. MNTU has consistently supported this goal and actively worked with the DNR and other partners to help achieve it. Due to the current catch and release regulation and hard work of many, steelhead fishing is good now and most anglers are very satisfied. But the population is not fully

recovered and cannot sustain harvest yet. The kamloops which were stocked into Lake Superior tributaries through April 2017 will continue to create problems in steelhead spawning areas through spring 2022. Since it takes five or more years for steelhead naturally reproduced in North Shore rivers to reach maturity, the first generation of returning adult steelhead produced without interference from kamloops will be in 2029. We remain committed to the goal of fully recovering our unique wild steelhead populations to the point where a very limited harvest is possible. We have been working hard to restore habitat and hydrology to make this possible and sustainable. However, steelhead stocks have not yet fully recovered and allowing harvest of wild steelhead prior to 2029 is not justifiable. This issue can be discussed when the Lake Superior management plan is revisited in 2025.

Stocking of steelhead

Regarding the stocking of steelhead, MNTU would have preferred that the DNR take more of a “wait and see” approach – ceasing kamloops stocking but continuing the very limited steelhead fry stocking called for in the recently revised management plan (covering 2016 to 2025). Given the new genetics tools at its disposal, the DNR can ensure that the steelhead fry are genetically pure and if necessary can reduce quotas proportionally to match egg availability. We see the value of supplementing wild runs in lower shore rivers where habitat and hydrology have been severely damaged by historically severe flooding in the past decade. Once watershed and habitat restoration work progress further fry stocking can be stopped.

While the wait and see approach outlined above was MNTU’s recommendation to DNR, we can accept the DNR’s proposal to stock a “clipped” genetically pure strain steelhead “frylings” in those two rivers where kamloops had been stocked, namely in French River and Lester River. We caution that these genetically pure steelhead should be raised in the domesticating environment of the hatchery only until they are large enough for adipose fins to be clipped. We understand that this new stocking program is being done only to provide a harvest opportunity until the wild steelhead fishery is fully recovered.

Encouraging harvest of kamloops; change limits only after kamloops are out of system

The kamloops which were stocked into Lake Superior tributaries through April 2017 will continue showing up in steelhead spawning areas through spring 2022. They remain a clear and present danger to steelhead recovery and their harvest should be encouraged. However, after 2022 the daily bag and possession limits for “clipped” steelhead should be reduced from three to one. One mistake made when the kamloops program was ramped up, and again when renewed, was the failure of the DNR to tell anglers that the Lake Superior ecosystem had changed since the 1970s and no longer can sustain a harvest of three 4 to 8 pound fish per day. Given the current forage base in Lake Superior, the degraded state of our watersheds, the finite (and relatively low) productivity of Lake Superior and tributaries, and anglers’ increased effectiveness, we do not foresee the harvest of more than one clipped adult steelhead to be sustainable. Steelhead anglers are currently very satisfied with fishing, despite the fact that they have no expectation of being able to harvest even one steelhead. Let’s set realistic harvest expectations (at one) for stocked, clipped steelhead as soon as kamloops have passed out of the system.

Redirecting coldwater expenditures to research, habitat and protection efforts

MNTU is concerned that DNR managers may be tempted to reduce the level of funding directed to management of coldwater fisheries in Lake Superior and its tributaries. The expensive put-grow-and-take kamloops stocking program has proven to be a very counterproductive “strategy” for steelhead rehabilitation. Even with the addition of a “clipped” steelhead fryling stocking program, the net amount of coldwater fisheries dollars saved by decommissioning the French River hatchery and discontinuing expensive kamloops stocking is substantial. Recovery and long term sustainability of steelhead, brook trout and lake trout fisheries, depend upon **increased** efforts to protect North Shore watersheds, improve their hydrology, acquire permanent conservation easements along stream corridors and restore stream habitat, and conduct surveys and research. For three decades the DNR expended large sums of coldwater fisheries budget dollars on what has proven to be a counterproductive stocking program. The steelhead fishery has suffered as a result. Those same dollar amounts which the DNR spent on management of coldwater fisheries in the Lake Superior basin, including French River Hatchery operations and kamloops stocking, must stay in the basin but be redirected to the types of concrete measures listed above. Having spent hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars on what has proven to be a counterproductive strategy, the DNR owes it to trout and steelhead anglers to maintain a similar level of funding for coldwater management here, but now direct it to more productive and longer term strategies.

A word to fellow anglers

The members of Minnesota Trout Unlimited are angler-conservationists. We do not focus our conservation efforts on specific species, but work toward robust, self-sustaining populations of all trout and salmon. We support science-based management, watershed protection and habitat restoration, as these ensure the maximum sustained productivity over the long term. As anglers we use every ethical angling method based upon personal preferences. Many members choose to harvest and eat surplus fish when and where they believe a given fishery can sustain such harvest without loss of quality. We believe in maximizing angling opportunities to the extent that the quality, stability and self-sustainability of the resource are not jeopardized.

Many MNTU members enjoy targeting kamloops. Unfortunately, we now know with certainty that stocking this domesticated hatchery strain poses a serious threat to the abundance, stability and self-sustainability of the North Shore’s storied steelhead fishery. We feel badly for our fellow anglers who enjoy shore casting for stocked kamloops. Many of these anglers are our members. Our opposition to kamloops stocking stems only from the fact that they consistently stray into steelhead spawning areas, interfere with steelhead reproduction and will eventually destroy a high quality, self-sustaining fishery through hybridization. We sincerely wish it were otherwise and take no joy in this difficult choice. However, given the scope of the threat, the only responsible course of action is for DNR to end all kamloops stocking.