

Sportfish Season Opening Dates Angler Survey

Jeff Loukmas, Warmwater Fisheries Unit, Central Office

8/11/2021

To help make fishing as simple and enjoyable as possible, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is examining the State's fishing regulations and identifying changes that have the potential to make them more consistent and easier to understand. Part of that effort includes scrutinizing opening dates for select sportfish seasons. Currently, opening day regulations for some sportfish are based on hard dates (e.g., April 1 for the trout harvest season) while others are based on a Saturday (e.g., 1st Saturday in May for walleye). DEC fisheries managers were interested in angler preferences for sportfish opening dates to help determine if switching to a hard date that affords the same protections as Saturday openers would provide for greater simplicity.

To gain a better understanding of the opening date preferences of the angling public, a web-based survey using Alchemer® was developed and delivered to all anglers that hold a New York State annual or lifetime fishing license and a valid email address in the Department of Environmental Conservation Automated Licensing System (DECALS) (340,499 total recipients). A link to the survey was delivered to these license holders via a DEC Gov Delivery email announcement. The survey, which was active from June 30 – July 14, 2021, included a brief background statement on sportfish season opening dates in New York and the following five questions:

1. In the past 5 years have you fished for:
 - walleye, northern pike, pickerel, or tiger muskellunge Yes/No
 - black bass (largemouth bass, smallmouth bass) Yes/No
 - muskellunge Yes/No
2. What season date format would you prefer for walleye, northern pike, pickerel, and tiger muskellunge?
 - 1st Saturday in May - March 15 (current format)
 - May 1 - March 15
 - No preference
3. What season date format would you prefer for black bass (largemouth bass and smallmouth bass) harvest season?
 - 3rd Saturday in June - November 30 (current format)
 - June 15 - November 30
 - No preference
4. What season date format would you prefer for the statewide muskellunge season?
 - Last Saturday in May - November 30 (current format)
 - June 1 - November 30
 - No preference
5. What season date format would you prefer for the Great Lakes muskellunge season (includes Lake Erie, Upper and Lower Niagara Rivers, Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River)?
 - 3rd Saturday in June - November 30 (Lake Erie and Upper Niagara River); 3rd Saturday in June - December 15 (Lower Niagara River, Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River) (current format)
 - June 15 - November 30 (Lake Erie and Upper Niagara River); June 15 - December 15 (Lower Niagara River, Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River)
 - No preference

DEC received 21,146 total responses, 19,033 (90.0%) of which were completed surveys. Only the results from completed surveys are presented here. Despite the survey being active for two weeks, almost all of the completed responses (18,246, 95.8%) were received in the first seven days (June 30 – July 6). Of the respondents who indicated that they had fished for a species or species group in the last 5 years



(Question 1), 63.2% had fished for walleye, northern pike, pickerel or tiger muskellunge, 85.7% had fished for black bass, and 15.6% had fished for muskellunge.

For the walleye, northern pike, pickerel and tiger muskellunge (coolwater sportfish) seasons, “No preference” was the most commonly selected option, followed closely by May 1st (Figure 1). 51.7% of respondents that targeted these coolwater sportfish, indicated they preferred a May 1st opening date, while only 22.4% favored the current Saturday opener.

Survey responses regarding the muskellunge seasons favored the “No Preference” option. Anglers who fished for muskellunge preferred June 15th (46.4%) over the 3rd Saturday in June (19.7%) for the Great Lakes opener, while preferences were evenly split between June 1 (40.4%) and the last Saturday in May (40.8%) for the statewide opener.

For the black bass season opening date, the majority of all respondents (55%) and respondents who fished for black bass (60.5%) selected June 15th as the preferred date, whereas only 19.9% of all respondents and 21.5% of respondents who fished for black bass preferred the 3rd Saturday in June (Figure 1).

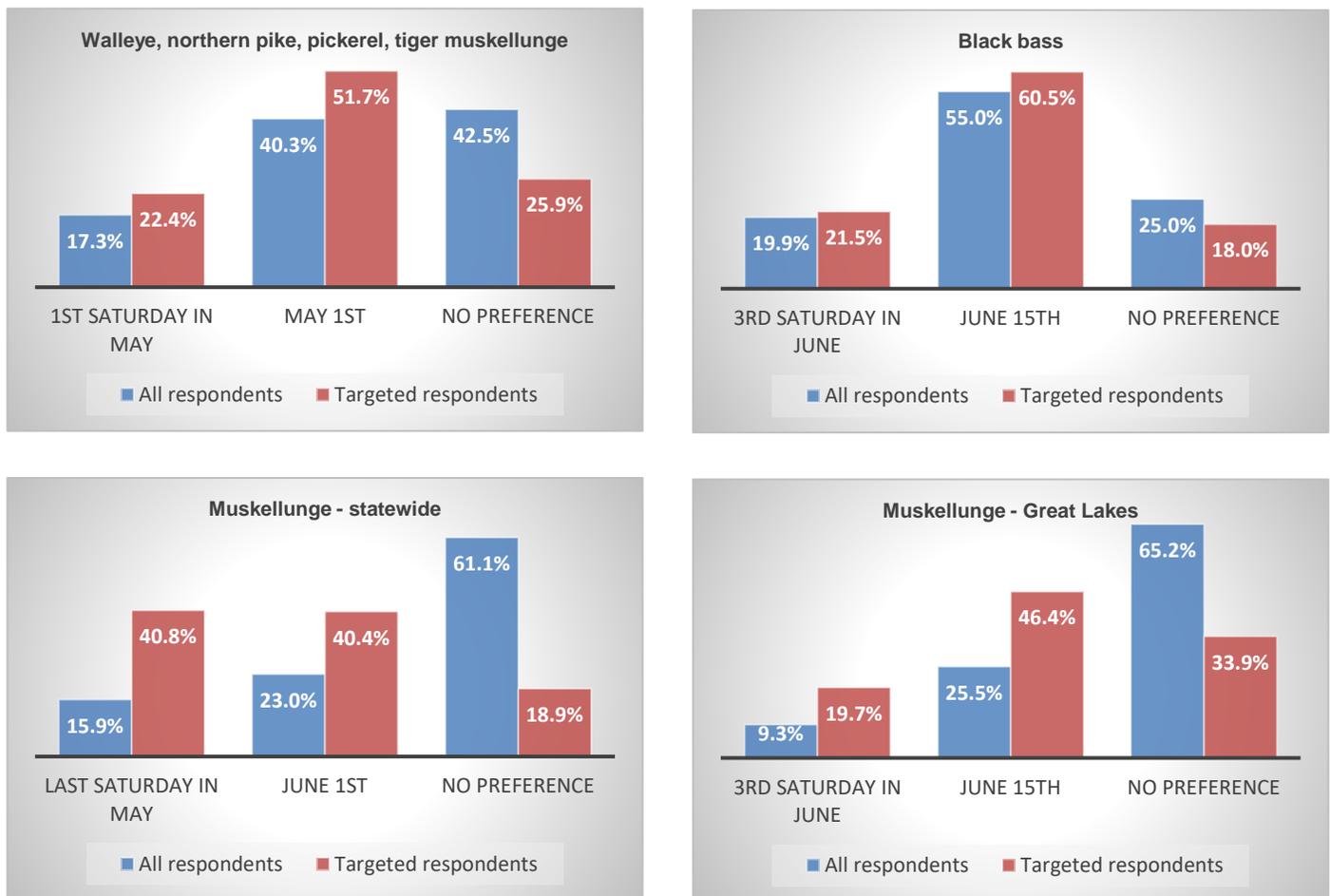


Figure 1. Percent New York State angler preferences for season open date options for walleye, northern pike, pickerel and tiger muskellunge, black bass, statewide muskellunge, and Great Lakes muskellunge.

The results of this survey suggest that anglers would be supportive of a change to a hard date for coolwater sportfish, black bass, and Great Lakes muskellunge, particularly anglers who fish for those species. Respondents who did not fish for a specific species or species group were more inclined to not have an opening date preference. These results will help inform decisions for setting appropriate season opening dates for these species in New York.