

**Background**

“How are the fish in my lake doing?” We need this answer to set appropriate fishing regulations, to understand and correct any problems with fish habitat, and to guard against invasive species. A healthy fish population and fish community means we can all enjoy the benefits of sustainable fisheries and healthy ecosystems. A standard method of assessing the status of fish populations is necessary to allow comparisons of fish sustainability across the years at a lake, and to compare to other lakes. In Alberta, we use an accepted standard of index netting for lake fisheries assessment. This method provides the necessary data on fish abundance, biological data (such as age and sex), and species diversity to assess sustainability.

**Fall Index Netting (FIN)**

Alberta Environment and Parks monitor Walleye and Northern Pike populations using standardized index netting (Morgan, 2002). Fall index netting occurs during late summer and fall when water temperatures are 10-15 °C. Standardized multi-mesh gill nets are set at random locations between 2 and 15 metres deep, set for 21-27 hours (i.e., a net-night), and then reset in new random locations. Information from Yellow Perch, Lake Whitefish, Burbot, minnow, and sucker species are also collected. The information collected from each fish includes length, weight, age, gender, and maturity. After sampling, if fish are appropriate for human consumption, Alberta biologists provide the fish to local Indigenous peoples or to persons on approved subsistence lists. Typically, a tiny proportion of the lake’s fish population (usually less than 1 or 2%) are killed in this sampling.

**How is this information used?**

Catch rates (i.e., number of fish captured per net-night) of Walleye and Northern Pike are an index of the populations’ abundance, with higher catch rates meaning there are more fish in the lake. The abundance of adult fish is compared to the standardized thresholds for 5 broad categories of risk to the long-term sustainability of the fish population, with higher densities of fish having lower risk (Table 1). The sizes and age of fish also tell us if problems with overharvest (e.g. too few fish living to old age) or habitat (e.g., poor spawning success) are a concern. Biologists use this information, as well as a variety of data on water quality, access, development, and habitat threats as part of Alberta’s Fish Sustainability Index (FSI).

The management goal for most Alberta fisheries is **long-term sustainability**, shown by the red lines on the graphs below. Achieving this goal uses the netting data and the FSI to

determine the most appropriate sport fishing regulations for a lake. This landscape-level assessment allows for consistent, broad temporal comparisons of fish sustainability and status. For more information please see Alberta’s FIN and FSI websites,

- <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/fisheries-management/fall-index-netting/default.aspx>
- <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/fisheries-management/fish-sustainability-index/default.aspx>

Table 1 – Alberta’s Fish Sustainability Index risk thresholds for Walleye and Northern Pike using the standardized Fall Index Net (FIN) method. **Note:** Thresholds align with species management frameworks.

Mature Walleyes / net	Mature Pike / net	Risk to Sustainability
>29.0	>21.8	Very Low
20.3-29.0	15.3-21.8	Low
14.5-20.2	10.9-15.2	Moderate
5.8-14.4	4.4-10.8	High
<5.8	<4.4	Very High

**Results of the 2017 FIN at Buck Lake**

Buck Lake (2,527 ha) is located approximately 140 km southwest from the city of Edmonton. From September 13-14, 2017, six gill nets captured 322 Walleyes, 15 Northern Pike, 2 Lake Whitefish, 14 Yellow Perch, and 2 White Suckers, from Buck Lake.

**Walleye**

The mean catch rate of Walleyes was 53.7/net-night. The catch rates of mature (Figure 1) and immature Walleyes were 44.5/net-night and 9.2/net-night, respectively. The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of Walleyes was assessed at **very low risk**.

The length distribution shows healthy recruitment, a moderate abundance of 300-330 mm Walleyes, very high abundance of fish larger than 380 mm, and severe truncation of Walleyes larger than 490 mm (Figure 2).

The 2017 FIN sample represented approximately 0.4% of the estimated mature Walleye population size.

**Northern Pike**

The mean catch rate of mature Northern Pike was 2.3/net-night (Figure 3). The corresponding FSI score for the mature density of Northern Pike was assessed at **very high risk**.

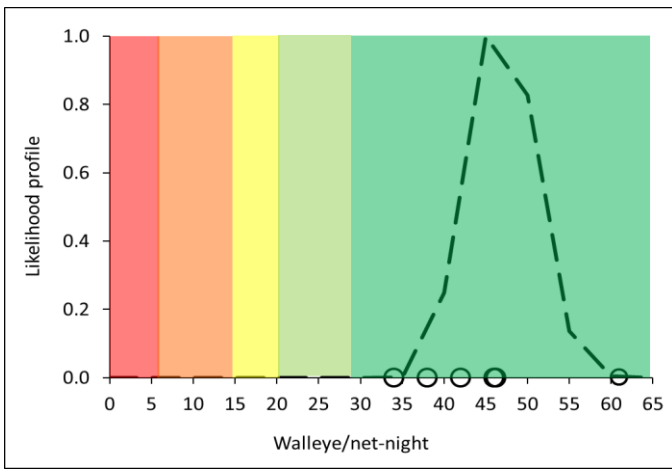


Figure 1 - The FIN catch rate of mature Walleyes from Buck Lake, 2017. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (44.5 fish/net-night), with individual net data indicated as hollow circles (n=6 nets).

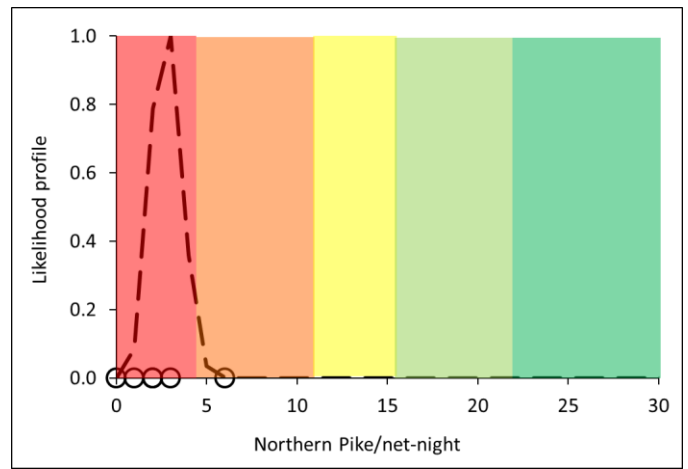


Figure 3 - The FIN catch rate of mature Northern Pike from Buck Lake, 2017. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (2.3 fish/net-night), with individual net data indicated as hollow circles (n=6 nets).

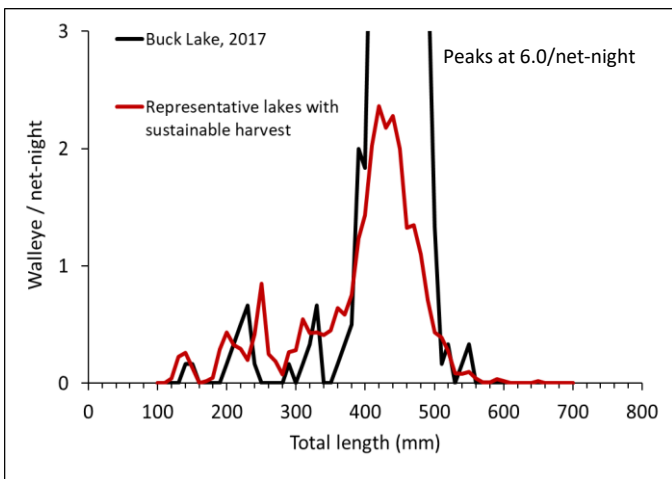


Figure 2 – FIN sample of showing size of Walleyes from Buck Lake, 2017. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Walleye from 5 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Walleye.

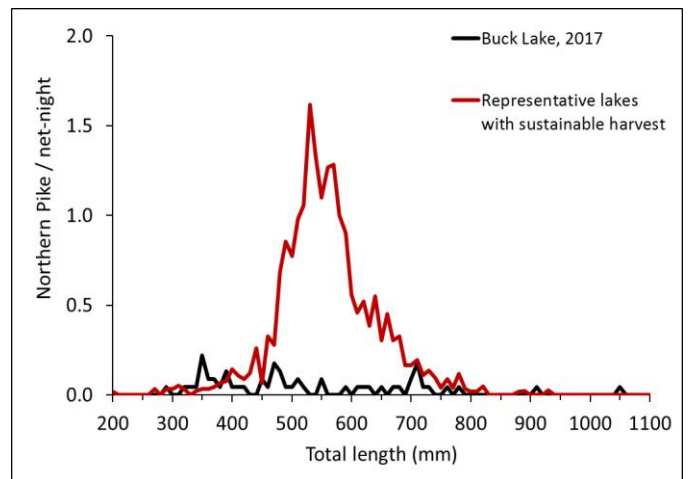


Figure 4 – FIN sample showing size of Northern Pike from Buck Lake, 2017. The red line indicates the average length distribution of pike from 6 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of pike.

The length distribution shows moderate recruitment of pike smaller than 400 mm but very poor abundance of fish larger than 400 mm (Figure 4).

The 2017 FIN sample represented approximately 0.1% of the estimated Northern Pike population size.

### Summary

Since the FINs conducted in the 2000s and in recent years, the abundance of mature Walleyes has increased to a corresponding FSI status of **very low risk**. Good recruitment and higher abundance of larger Walleye support the management goal of long-term sustainability.

Over the last ten years, the corresponding FSI status of mature Northern Pike has decreased from **high risk** to **very high risk**. Strict conservation-based management is necessary for this fishery to reach the management objective and to improve the long-term sustainability of this fishery.

### Literature

Morgan, G.E. 2002. Manual of Instructions-Fall Walleye Index Netting. Percid Community Synthesis, Diagnostics and Sampling Standards Working Group. Laurentian University, Sudbury Ontario.