

# What We Heard



Fisheries Engagement Sessions

APRIL 2020



# Minister's Message

Alberta offers some of the best outdoor recreational opportunities found anywhere in the world. Our province's rivers, lakes and streams are home to a variety of fish species that offer Albertans and visitors to our province a rewarding angling experience.

Fishing is a part of Alberta's cultural fabric and we promised to work together to make our fisheries strong, healthy, vibrant and sustainable for generations to come. That's why Alberta Environment and Parks recently held a series of open house events and online engagement to hear from some of our province's most passionate anglers on key fisheries management concepts.

And what a valuable exercise it was. More than 1,200 Albertans joined us at one of our open house events, with nearly 800 more participating online. Thank you to everyone who took the time to share their priorities and offer their advice and feedback on our fisheries management proposals.

You provided clear direction on offering additional harvest opportunities, where sustainable, and continuing our efforts to protect species at risk. Your feedback was instrumental in supporting our strategies to deliver additional harvest opportunities for pike and walleye, which include resuming walleye stocking to establish put-grow-take walleye fisheries and transferring fish, such as yellow perch, from donor waterbodies with high abundance.

We heard your support for an expanded stocking program that includes species diversification and restoration stocking to support Alberta's native trout recovery program. Many of you also asked that the province continue its efforts to protect the habitat of species at risk and I want you to know that we are committed to continuing this work.

We take your feedback seriously, with many of the strongly supported proposals reflected in Alberta's 2020 Sportfishing Regulations.

Thanks again for taking the time to give us your thoughts on fisheries management in Alberta. This was an important first step towards a more collaborative effort to effectively manage Alberta's fish populations. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on fishing in Alberta in the months and years ahead.

Jason Nixon  
Minister, Environment and Parks

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# Executive Summary

## What We Heard

Both on-line and in-person participants were asked to provide feedback and level of support, on the following fisheries management proposals:

- Increasing angling opportunities by creating new trout stocking locations, and diversifying fisheries that are already stocked by adding species such as tiger trout.
- Increasing fishing opportunities by transferring fish, such as yellow perch, from donor water bodies with higher abundance to those that are currently without fish or that have very low abundance.
- Concerns were raised that native trout species were being negatively impacted by habitat destruction and recommended that habitat protection and restoration be a focus.
- Implementing harvest slot limits for walleye and northern pike, and where supported, using the appropriate slot limit size.
- Expanding the number of regulations supporting harvest opportunities (less restrictive), particularly on lakes prone to winterkill.
- Resuming walleye stocking to establish put-grow-take walleye fisheries.
- Providing additional harvest of non-native trout in certain streams and rivers along the eastern slopes of the rocky mountains.
- Attendees also expressed concerns about the spread of invasive species.

Information and opinions on fisheries management was collected from 2,008 Albertans through online and in person opportunities.

In general, there was good support for these proposals, with the exception of expanding the number of liberal harvest opportunities and providing additional harvest opportunities of non-native trout in rivers.

While participants supported the proposals, many assessed that Alberta Environment and Parks needs to consider ecological integrity and sustainability when making decisions, especially when the decisions concerned native fish. Many participants were hesitant to provide opinions on specific decisions such as preferred harvest slot size range as they felt they did not have the knowledge for this and indicated that the fisheries biologists should make those decisions. Overall, the message provided to Alberta Environment and Parks on the proposals was to proceed cautiously with good data, manage the risks, improved information provided to anglers, and enforce regulations.

Participants were also asked what other topics they would like to discuss at future engagement sessions. A variety of suggestions were put forward with common topics including:

- Enhancing yellow perch fishing opportunities.
- Improving the existing Special Harvest License (SHL) system and tag process.
- Exploring licensing and revenue opportunities, focusing on directing more licensing revenue to stocking programs, habitat restoration, fish transfers and monitoring.
- Implementing barbless hooks and additional gear restrictions for east slope trout fisheries in rivers.
- Addressing habitat protection and recovery.
- Providing opportunities for stakeholders to be more involved in fisheries management programs.

# Detailed Engagement Results

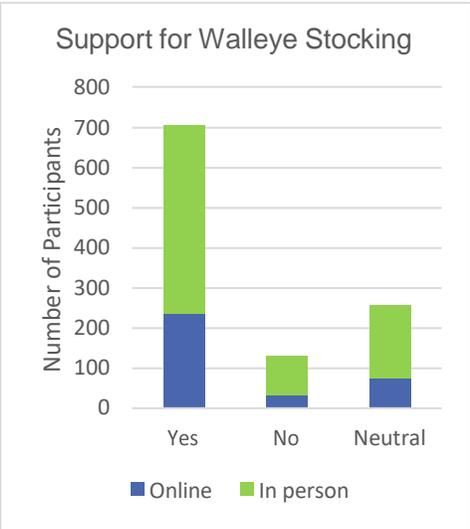
## Walleye Stocking Proposal

Alberta Environment and Parks proposed to resume walleye stocking as a means to provide additional harvest opportunities. The intent of this program is not to create self-sustaining populations but ongoing sustainable stocked walleye fishing opportunities. **Stocked walleye are not expected to reach a harvestable size for four to five years.**

Support for this proposal was received from participants, both online and in-person. Many participants indicated that they enjoy harvesting walleye and welcome additional harvest opportunities. Others indicated they prefer to fish for other species like trout or perch, or that they supported current regulations.

The most common considerations expressed by participants in regards to this proposal were:

- A feeling that stocking walleye could help spread out fishing pressure.
- A need to understand why walleye populations have previously declined.
- Concern that the current focus on walleye is detracting from the management of other species and that walleye are having a negative impact on certain species, such as perch.
- Concern regarding disease transfer and potential impacts to wild populations and the ecosystem through stocking.
- A feeling that the regulations must be enforced to be effective.
- Concern that the costs of stocking may not outweigh the benefits



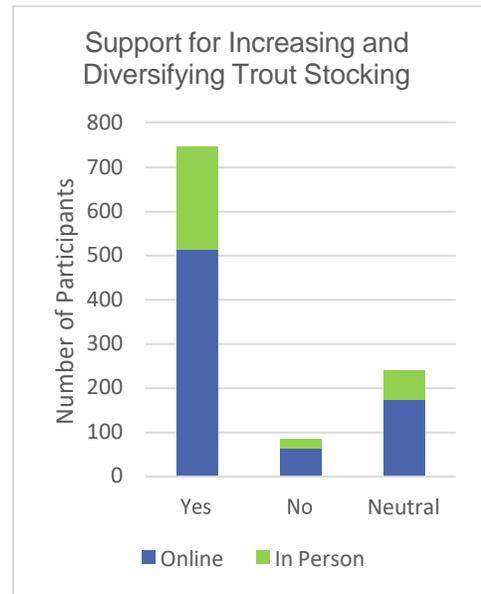
## Increasing and Diversifying Trout Stocking

Alberta Environment and Parks proposed to increase angling opportunities by creating new trout fisheries and by diversifying fisheries by stocking species such as tiger trout in waterbodies that are already stocked with other trout.

This proposal received support from both in person and online participants.

The common considerations expressed were:

- Opportunities should be balanced across the landscape.
- Stocking of non-native species should be limited to sterile species to avoid impacts to native populations.
- Additional angling and harvest opportunities could potentially help relieve pressure on other sensitive water bodies and species.
- Stocking should only occur in water bodies without native trout and where the waterbody is not connected to other waterbodies to help reduce the impacts to native populations.
- Diversification could spread out anglers, reducing pressure on some lakes.
- Concern regarding the costs associated with stocking and if this is the best use of funds or if money should be directed to fisheries and habitat management initiatives.



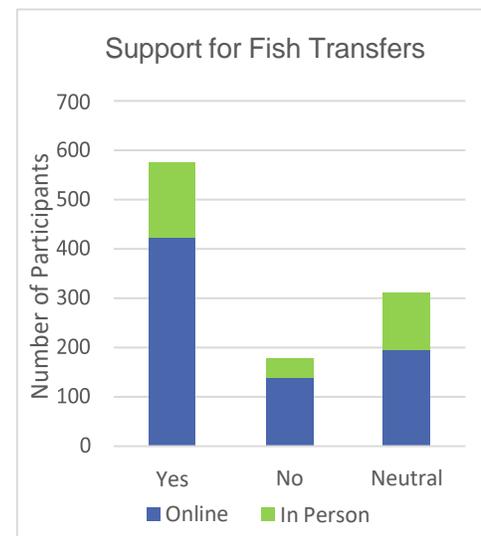
## Fish Transfers

A proposal was put forward to move fish from donor water bodies with high abundance to waterbodies with very low abundance to create new fisheries, re-establish fisheries lost to drought or winterkill, or supplement existing ones. Measures would be put in place to minimize the risk of moving non-target species and diseases through adherence to provincial and national standards for the introduction and transfer of fish species.

This proposal received support both online and in person; however, there was a significant component of neutral and negative responses.

The main considerations provided by participants included:

- Transfers could restore lost pike fisheries and create or supplement perch fisheries.
- Diseases or invasive species could be transferred.
- Provides opportunities closer to major urban centers.
- Taking from a healthy population would negatively impact that population without having a significant positive impact on the unhealthy population.



- Concern that this could encourage non-regulated transfers that would not have measures in place to prevent transfer of diseases or invasive species.
- Concern that costs may outweigh benefits.
- Transferring fish doesn't necessarily address why the existing or previous population isn't doing well (or was lost).

## Walleye and Northern Pike Slot Limits

Participants were asked if they would like to see a harvest slot-size regulation implemented for walleye and northern pike. The majority of participants responded they were not opposed to a harvest slot size. Others indicated support for the current, or modified Special Harvest License (SHL or walleye tags), while others supported the current regulations as they felt it allowed anglers to actually catch a fish. Numerous comments and considerations were provided and included:

- Ensure the slot limit does not remove female fish responsible for reproduction.
- Concern that current catch rates and overall fish densities would decrease under a harvest slot.
- Recommendation that the slot size limit be determined on a lake by lake basis instead of a one size fits all method.
- Consider a daily limit as an alternative to a harvest slot size limit.
- Concern that there may be limited monitoring and enforcement capacity.



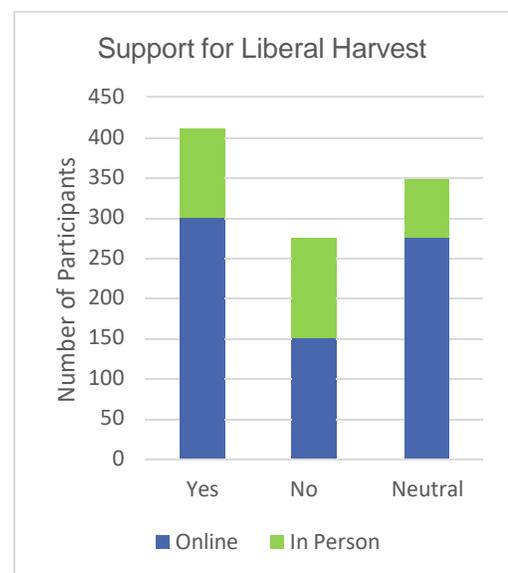
Participants were also asked if they had a preferred harvest slot size range for both walleye and northern pike. There was a lot of variety in the slot sizes selected and many were specific to individual lakes. A significant portion of participants suggested that biologists should select the harvest size range based on science and that different ranges may be required on different lakes. Where participants did select a size, the preference for walleye was a harvest slot of 45-50 cm followed by a harvest slot of 50 – 55 cm. For northern pike, the first choice was a harvest slot of 63-70 cm followed by a harvest slot of 55-63 cm.

## Liberal Harvest

Alberta Environment and Parks proposed introducing more liberal regulations at some lakes to provide additional harvest opportunities in waters where populations are already limited by habitat or other circumstances, such as winter and summer kills. The goal would be to manage primarily for angler harvest where fish may be lost from these natural events. As such, fewer restrictions would be applied, size limits may not be imposed, and fish populations would be monitored infrequently.

This proposal had the weakest support out of all the proposals. Participants brought forward the following considerations:

- Concern over the sustainability of this practice.
- The feeling that they do not have enough information to make an informed decision.
- Concern that it may create enforcement issues on nearby lakes with more restrictive regulations.
- It makes sense to allow opportunity to harvest fish that may not otherwise survive.
- Suggestion that it may take pressure off other lakes.



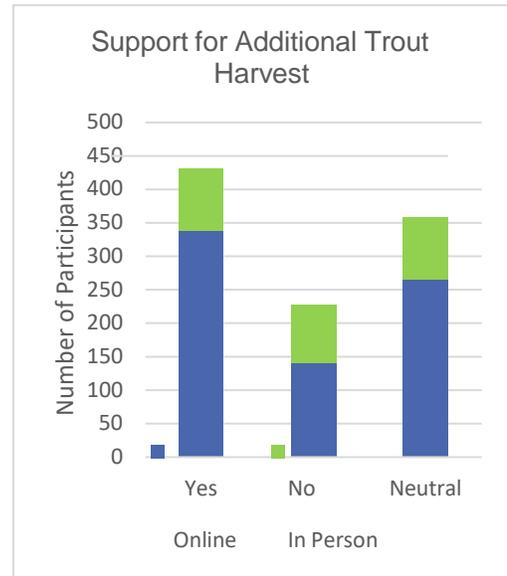
## Additional Trout Harvest

Alberta Environment and Parks proposed to increase harvest of non-native trout species in select rivers where established populations of non-native trout species exist.

This proposal received mixed response with a noticeable difference between in-person and online responses.

Considerations expressed by participants included:

- The harvest of non-native trout could help native trout by reducing competition and hybridization risk.
- Strong support for enhanced angler education focused on species identification and safe fish handling. Suggestion that a fish identification test should be mandatory prior to angling in these waterbodies.
- Concern that the proposal will increase angling pressure resulting in increased mortality of native fish.
- Desire to ensure there would be no negative impacts to native species.



# Putting Your Input Into Action

Alberta Environment and Parks has incorporated the feedback into the following actions for 2020/21. In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, some of these actions have been postponed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both Ministry staff and Albertans. Items that are temporarily postponed because of COVID-19 are identified with a blue asterisk.

## Additional Harvest Opportunities

Additional harvest opportunities were incorporated into the 2020/21 Alberta Sportfishing regulations. They include:

- 26 walleye and 10 northern pike harvest slot limits. This includes converting 12 lakes from special harvest licenses to harvest slot limits. Harvest slot limits of 45 cm – 50 cm or 50 cm – 55 cm will be used for walleye, and harvest slot limits of 55 cm - 63cm, or 63 cm – 70 cm will be used for northern pike.
- Increasing the number of special harvest licenses (SHL or walleye tags) available on some lakes, such as Pigeon Lake.
- Providing harvest opportunities for non-native trout in two locations. This number was reduced and locations carefully considered based on concerns relating to potential negative impacts to native trout species.
- Adding liberal harvest opportunities (daily fish bag limit with no size restriction) on seven walleye and 21 northern pike fisheries.

These changes will be monitored or managed to ensure future sustainability.

## Commitment to Stocking, Species Diversification and Revitalization of the Fish Culture Program

- Significant investments totaling more than \$50 million were made earlier this year, in support of Alberta's four provincial fish hatcheries. This investment will pay dividends through expanded and modernized operations supporting larger, more efficient and more bio-secure stocking program for the 2.1 million trout produced and stocked across Alberta.
- Beginning in 2020, fisheries management will collect walleye eggs for raising in Alberta's fish culture system to establish put-grow-take fishing opportunities. In 2020 efforts will be focused on locating suitable collection sites. It is expected that walleye fry stocked in 2020 will be harvestable by anglers in four to five years. \* Postponed until spring 2021 because of COVID-19 risks. This work is tied to spawning times and environmental conditions and cannot be rescheduled this year.

- It is anticipated that Alberta's stocking program will continue to expand over subsequent years and additional species will be considered for stocking.
- To further diversify Alberta fisheries, tiger trout and brown trout will be stocked in additional waterbodies in 2020. Currently, tiger trout are stocked in a very limited number of Alberta waterbodies.
- Transfers of yellow perch, pike, and potentially walleye are planned for 2020/21.
- Restoration stocking of Westslope Cutthroat trout in the upper Oldman River will continue in 2020 as part of Alberta's Native Trout Recovery program.

## Involving Anglers

- Voluntary angler reporting is expected to begin as early as May 2020. This information will support decision-making about Special Harvest Licence (SHL) allocations and options to innovate and improve the SHL system.
- Partnerships with Albertans and stakeholder groups will be encouraged. Activities may include involvement in fish stocking and fish transfers, community based monitoring and citizen science opportunities, as well as education and outreach initiatives.
  - \* Certain activities that maintain compliance with Alberta public health orders may proceed however other activities may be postponed temporarily pending further information on COVID-19 risks.
- Continuing discussions with Albertans on additional fisheries management topics that were raised during engagement sessions. \* In person discussions postponed temporarily pending further information on COVID-19 risks however opportunities for other options that maintain physical distancing will be evaluated.



# Where and How Did We Engage?

## Engagement Session Structure

The Fisheries Management Engagement Sessions provided an opportunity for Alberta Environment and Parks to hear from Albertans on their experiences, concerns and suggestions relating to the management of fisheries in Alberta. Government hosted 14 open house engagement sessions across the province to provide opportunities to engage in discussion with anglers and hear directly from them on their thoughts and ideas for fisheries management. Concurrent to these sessions, information and a survey was available on line through Talk AEP ([www.talkaep.alberta.ca](http://www.talkaep.alberta.ca)), providing Albertans who were unable to attend a session in person, an opportunity to also provide their insights.

## Participation

Participants at the in-person sessions were asked to provide feedback on the open house and experience with the process. The majority of participants expressed support for the open house format and an appreciation for the opportunity to provide their thoughts and to be able to have a conversation directly with front line fisheries staff. Participants indicated they supported on-going opportunities similar to these in the future.



Location	Date	Attendance
Grande Prairie	Jan 13, 2020	47
Drumheller	January 15, 2020	49
Red Deer	January 16, 2020	63
Edson	January 16, 2020	34
Cold Lake	January 20, 2020	98
Lethbridge	January 20, 2020	162
Calgary	January 21, 2020	186
Edmonton/St. Albert	January 22, 2020	145
St. Paul	January 27, 2020	130
Lac La Biche	January 28, 2020	110
Slave Lake	January 30, 2020	35
Rocky Mountain House	January 31, 2020	68
Medicine Hat	February 11, 2020	69
Brooks	February 13, 2020	29
		1225

## Online Engagement

Online engagement was open to the public through TalkAEP.Alberta.ca from January 13 to February 3, 2020. During this time, 783 participants completed the survey.

# Thank You

Alberta Environment and Parks would like to thank everyone who attended a session or provided input online. A great diversity of comments and suggestions was received from across the province. This input was carefully considered, and where feasible, incorporated into the 2020 sportfishing regulations and fisheries management plans, or identified for further discussion. This year, Environment and Parks will be monitoring and evaluating fisheries at various lakes and rivers across Alberta. The exciting changes made this year to the sportfishing regulations will be our focus.

Alberta Environment and Parks will continue to engage with anglers in 2020 to further develop and implement fisheries management strategies for Alberta. Upcoming engagement sessions after the summer and fall fishing season winds down will be offered in person, where health restrictions allow, and online.