

ISSUES SUBMITTAL FORM

Date: 8/26/2022

ISSUE:	Should Colorado Parks and Wildlife increase bag and possession limits for walleye at Rifle Gap Reservoir?
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DISCUSSION (FACTS AND FIGURES, EXPLANATION OF ISSUE):

Walleye have historically been a very popular sportfish in Rifle Gap Reservoir and have maintained a naturally reproducing population since they were first stocked by CDOW in 1972. Declines in walleye densities were observed in CPW's standardized survey data in the late 2000's and early 2010's, including a fishery survey in 2010 in which no walleye were collected (Figure 1). A lake management plan for Rifle Gap Reservoir was approved by the States of Utah and Wyoming, along with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 2015 through the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, which now allows for the annual stocking of triploid (sterile) walleye. Stocking of triploid walleye in Rifle Gap provides CPW the opportunity to manage for this popular sportfish while protecting downstream native fish populations. Currently, this is the only sterile walleye fishery, and only one of two walleye fisheries in NW Colorado that CPW manages. Furthermore, a fish screen on Rifle Creek downstream of Rifle Gap Reservoir prevents movement of non-native fish from the reservoir into downstream waters, including the lower portion of Rifle Creek and the Colorado River downstream of Rifle, both of which CPW manages for native listed and non-listed species.

Following the stocking of triploid walleye, which began in 2015, increases in walleye densities have been observed during CPW's standardized fishery surveys (Figure 1). Conversations with anglers also indicate that angler catch rates for walleye have increased since the triploid stocking program began. The current bag and possession limit for walleye at Rifle Gap Reservoir is one fish, minimum of 18 inches in length. Increasing bag and possession limits will allow increased angler opportunities for harvest of walleye and will benefit the fishery by moderating the high density of walleye in the 15 to 18 inch length range (Figure 2). Increasing harvest of walleye will also reduce predation pressure on yellow perch, benefitting the fishery as well because yellow perch catch rates have been decreasing in recent standardized fishery surveys. Yellow perch are the primary forage fish for many of the predatory sportfish in Rifle Gap Reservoir. They are very popular with anglers as yellow perch regularly grow to sizes that approach length and weight state records.

Aging data indicate walleye in Rifle Gap Reservoir grow relatively slowly, and fish that exceed 30 inches in length are often over 20 years old. There is a high angler demand for trophy walleye angling opportunities, and Rifle Gap has proven to be capable of growing walleye, which approach state record size. Given the demand for trophy fish, and the length of time it takes to produce these fish, proposed increases in walleye bag and possession limits at Rifle Gap Reservoir are intended to target more abundant, intermediate-sized walleye (15 to 18 inches in length) while keeping the same current regulation of allowing the harvest of only one walleye over 18 inches.

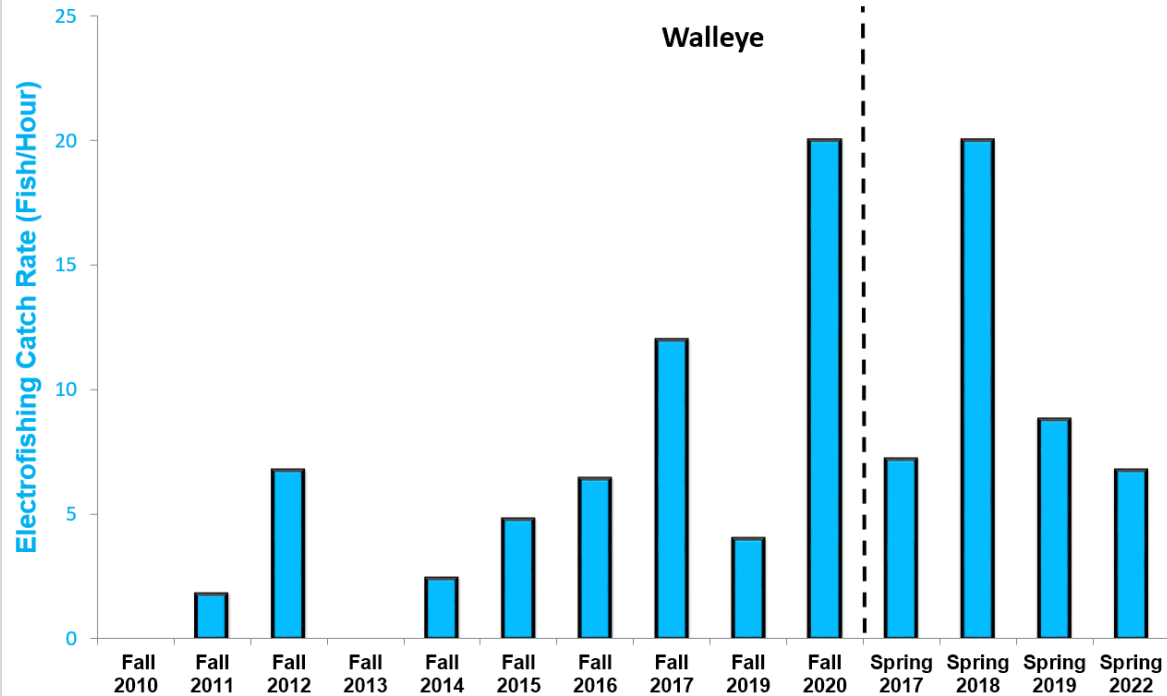


Figure 1. Electrofishing catch rate in fish per hour of walleye captured during fall and spring fishery surveys on Rifle Gap Reservoir, 2010-2022. Fall and spring surveys are separated by a dashed line because they are not directly comparable due to differences in seasonality.

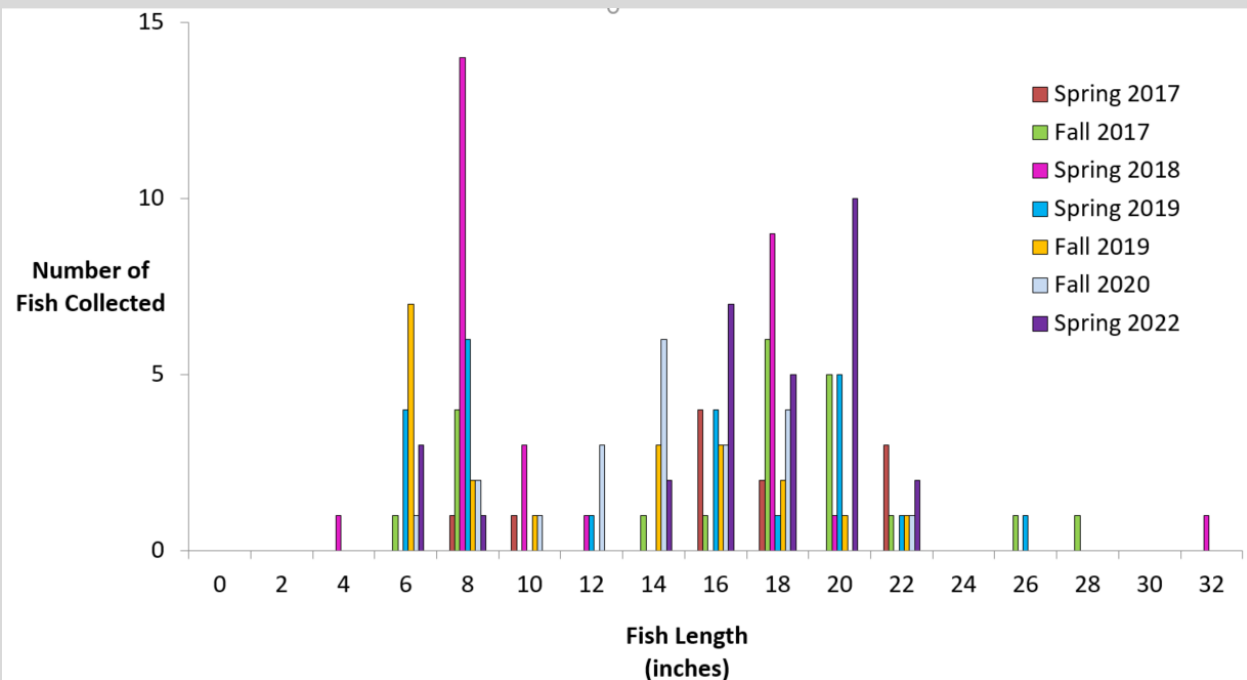


Figure 2. Length frequency histogram of walleye surveyed in Rifle Gap Reservoir during CPW's standardized fishery surveys, 2017-2022.

STATE LAW REQUIRES CPW TO SOLICIT INPUT FROM STAKEHOLDERS THAT MAY BE AFFECTED POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY BY THE PROPOSED RULES. THE FOLLOWING STAKEHOLDERS HAVE BEEN ADVISED OF AND INVITED TO PROVIDE INPUT ON THE REGULATORY CHANGES PROPOSED IN THIS ISSUE PAPER:

***IT IS ASSUMED THAT ALL NECESSARY INTERNAL PARTIES HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED*.**

- Anglers and the general public. This proposed regulation change, and a presentation of fishery data and alternatives, were presented at two public meetings held in March of 2022 in Rifle and Grand Junction. Additional options for anglers to provide input were advertised during the public meetings and on CPW's website, including comment cards and an online comment form. In general, feedback received at the public meetings and from the online comment form were supportive of either alternative, which allow for increased harvest of 15 to 18 inch walleye.

ALTERNATIVES: (POSSIBLE OUTCOMES or POSSIBLE REGULATIONS):

Chapter W-1 Fishing: Article II, #108 B:

1. *Preferred Alternative*:

335. Rifle Gap Reservoir - Garfield County

- The bag and possession limit and minimum size for walleye is ~~one~~ three fish, ~~18~~ 15 inches in length.
- ~~The bag and possession limit for yellow perch is twenty fish.~~
- No more than one walleye greater than 18 inches in length may be taken per day.
- The bag and possession limit for yellow perch is twenty fish.

2. Alternative #2: Status quo, no change:

335. Rifle Gap Reservoir - Garfield County

- The bag and possession limit and minimum size for walleye is one fish, 18 inches in length.
- The bag and possession limit for yellow perch is twenty fish.

Issue Raised by:	Ben Felt (Area 7 Aquatic Biologist), Brian Gray (Rifle North District Wildlife Manager), Brian Palcer (Rifle Gap State Park Manager)
Author of the issue paper (if different than person raising the issue):	Ben Felt
CC:	Brian Gray, Brian Palcer, Kirk Oldham, Lori Martin
APPROVED FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION BY:	
REQUIRES NEW SPACE IN THE BROCHURE?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO
ARE ADEQUATE STAFF AND FUNDING RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO IMPLEMENT?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
REGION, BRANCH, OR SECTION LEADING IMPLEMENTATION	Aquatics
RECOMMENDED FOR CONSENT AGENDA?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO