

March 12, 1997

The Great Lakes Fish Health Committee:

**A Strategy to Help Achieve the
Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Strategic Vision**

Earlier this decade, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) reviewed its programs in an effort to sharpen its focus on the future. This review resulted in the publication of a Strategic Vision Statement in February 1992, which outlined the focus, direction and intent of Commission programs through the year 2000. The GLFC Strategic Vision was based on an ecosystem approach to managing the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes Fish Disease Control Committee was established by the GLFC in 1973 to recommend measures to protect the health of fish in the Great Lakes basin. The Committee is composed of representatives from state, provincial, tribal and federal agencies involved in managing Great Lakes communities and from private aquaculture interests. Every effort is made to base Committee recommendations and decision on consensus of the membership.

In the past two decades, the Committee has made considerable progress in improving fish health management in the Great Lakes basin. Some of the achievements include:

- development and publication of policies and protocols to reduce the risk of introducing or transferring serious disease agents into or within the Great Lakes basin (e.g. the "Great Lakes Fish Disease Control Policy and Model Program" and "Protocol to Minimize the Risk of Introducing Emergency Disease Agents with Importation of Salmonid Fishes from Enzootic Areas");
- discussing and recommending ways for agencies or members to deal with serious disease situations and associated fisheries management decisions (e.g. where and if to stock or destroy infected hatchery fish) and providing support for these actions;
- increasing awareness of the importance of fish health in both wild and cultured fish through participation at GLFC and Lake Committee meetings, and through development of educational tools such as the publication "A Guide to Integrated Fish Health Management in the Great Lakes Basin";
- providing a focus for the transfer of new fish health science and technology that is in turn used to update Committee policies and protocols, as well as in the development or revision of member agency legislation and policies.

The development of the Great Lakes Vision Statement provided an excellent opportunity for the Committee to re-evaluate its mandate and to develop strategies that will contribute to the achievement of the Vision over the next decade.

Strategies that the Committee will need to implement in order to achieve its mandate include five major areas:

1. Defining and Measuring Fish Health
2. Disease Avoidance, Control and Eradication
3. Research
4. Extension and Education; and
5. Partnerships.

The mandate of the Committee has always been broader than “Disease Control.” In keeping with the ecosystem approach and the Committee’s goal of protecting the health of fish as an integral part of the Great Lakes ecosystem, the name of the Committee to accomplish the following strategy is the Great Lakes Fish Health Committee (GLFHC).

Goal Statement: The Great Lakes Fish Health Committee shall recommend measures to protect and improve the health of fish in the Great Lakes basin.

1. DEFINING and MEASURING FISH HEALTH

Strategy: Define fish health and develop monitoring techniques to establish fish quality standards by:

- (a) reviewing fish health assessment indices, recommending those appropriate to the Great Lakes, and encouraging cooperative programs across agencies;
- (b) promoting the importance of monitoring fish populations for the presence of infection disease agents, encouraging use of fish health indices as measures of ecosystem health, and, using both, separately or in combination, as tools for making management decisions.

Committee’s Actions:

- develop and recommend a program for monitoring fish health in wild fish populations, including the development and use of fish health indices (HIGH PRIORITY) and establishment of a standard for an indicator of a “healthy” vs “unhealthy” ecosystem;
- review processes and format of fish health data collection methodology around the Great Lakes basin and recommend a consistent approach;

- investigate quality assurance and quality control (QA/QC) programs for fish health monitoring and diagnostic laboratories and ensure consistency with national and international QA/QC initiatives.

2. DISEASE AVOIDANCE, CONTROL AND ERADICATION

Strategy: Coordinate fish health management efforts to avoid, control and eradicate serious fish diseases, by:

- (a) developing and maintaining model policies, procedures and protocols for fish health management, including quantitative criteria to be used to declare fish healthy;
- (b) developing risk assessment techniques and frameworks for decision making;
- (c) facilitating the safe transfer of eggs and fish into and within the Great Lakes basin;
- (d) supporting fisheries managers in making rational decisions based on sound fish health management (e.g. disposition of diseased fish);
- (e) providing a forum for inter-agency peer review and input to fish health issues including deviations from established guidelines.

Committee's Actions:

- assign one Committee member to liaise with other national and international fish health committees to determine important issues in other jurisdictions and report back to the Committee at its annual meeting;
- request annual reports using a standard format by all member agencies reviewing their ability to operate using the model program over the past year.

3. RESEARCH

Strategy: Develop a long-term research strategy for fish health protection by:

- (a) identifying priority areas of study including cause, prevention and ecological impacts of fish diseases;
- (b) encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach to ecological research, which includes consideration of fish health issues and their influence on fish populations;

(c) liaising with decision-makers in government agencies and the aquaculture industry to ensure that fish health research priorities are included in research programs.

Committee's Actions:

- incorporate GLFHC research priorities into the Board of Technical Experts (BOTE) research priorities (HIGH PRIORITY);
- assign a working group including government and aquaculture industry representatives to establish a strategy is broadly communicated and promoted within the aquatic ecosystem research community;
- urgent research priorities include the early mortality syndrome (HIGH Priority), BKD management research and the development of a diagnostic tool for EED virus in lake trout (HIGH PRIORITY).

4. EXTENSION and EDUCATION EFFORTS

Strategy: Increase awareness and understanding of fish health issues by:

- (a) providing workshops (e.g. new technology development) for member agencies, members of the Lake Committees and other GLFC Boards and Committees, and government and private fish culture personnel;
- (b) identifying extension needs and supporting extension services provided to other stakeholders by member agencies, (e.g. private aquaculture sector);
- (c) preparing publication, scientific information, and other information relative to fish health protection;
- (d) providing information exchange on INAD's, chemicals and therapeutants;
- (e) supporting good fish culture practices, (e.g. Guide to Integrated Fish Health Management).

Committee's Actions:

- assign a working group to organize at least one workshop on a topic chosen by the members to be held in conjunctions with the annual meeting;

- meet with Lake Committees to communicate the role of the Committee, and to identify and resolve fish health protection issues within each lake;
- update “A Guide to Integrated Fish Health Management in the Great Lakes Basin”;
- ensure cooperation and coordination on INAD activities;
- develop a publication on hatchery sanitation and disinfection protocols;
- develop a publication on BKD in Lake Michigan;
- develop a publication on EMS perhaps in cooperation with Baltic countries;
- review and update the model program.

5. PARTNERSHIPS

Strategy: Develop partnerships with agencies, institutions, First Nations/Native Americans, other Commission Boards and Committees, the commercial aquaculture industry, and other stakeholders (e.g., Sea Grant Programs) to improve the effectiveness of fish health management programs.

- (a) encourage the consistent application of GLFHC policies, procedures and protocols in local stocking and commercial aquaculture regulations and practices, First Nation/Native American agreements and local hatchery management practices;
- (b) encourage research institutions to consider GLFHC research priorities in developing their programs.

Committee’s Actions:

- develop a list of stakeholders/partners that defines how the Committee provides products or services, how the Committee and stakeholders will interact, and stakeholder/partnership involvement.