

## Let's work together to create the commercial fishing equivalent of the FWEF

As the newly elected President of the Manitoba Wildlife Federation (MWF), I would like to respond to the accusations directed at the MWF by the Pioneer Commercial Fishers of Manitoba (PCFM) and Liberal leader Dougald Lamont in the May 27, 2021, issue of the *Express Weekly News*. I found Mr. Lamont's comments puzzling and distressing since one of the rules to effectively manage a shared resource is to have a complete understanding of the issue and a willingness to listen to all involved. Mr. Lamont chose to ignore that rule and to aggressively take sides against the 150,000 Manitobans who purchase angling licences not to mention the additional 40,000 non-residents who enjoy Manitoba's angling and pour millions into our economy.

The MWF is Manitoba's largest hunting, angling and sport shooting organization and our 15,000 members reside in all parts of Manitoba. The MWF has a long and storied history of advocating for sustainable use of Manitoba's fish and wildlife resources. Mr. Lamont and the PCFM take issue with the fact that the MWF advocates to government on behalf of our members and for our natural resources. We make no apology for that. Fish and wildlife in Manitoba are governed under what is referred to as "the North American Model" whereby fish and wildlife are publicly owned resources and are managed by government agencies. Therefore, the MWF continues to have on-going conversations with all governments regardless of political party to build relationships and to further fish and wildlife conservation. Although COVID has limited our ability to meet in person, we welcome the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Lamont to discuss this further when restrictions allow.

The article states that the value of

Manitoba's commercial fishery is estimated to be \$90 million. We certainly respect and support those who choose to make a living by commercial fishing; these are highly skilled individuals who work hard. We would also point out that those involved in the "business" of recreational fishing work just as hard as commercial fishermen, be they lodge owners, motels and hotels operators, guides, boat dealers, fishing equipment suppliers, truck dealers, and many more. These businesses largely or partly exist to provide services to the almost 190,000 anglers (residents and non-residents) who purchase licences in Manitoba. In 2019 Travel Manitoba conducted a major study on the value of hunting and angling in Manitoba and here is a quick summary of the results. Manitoba's 190,000 anglers spent \$268 million on their angling. But, this does not include the untold thousands of dollars of capital spending on boats, snowmobiles, quads, and vehicles! Furthermore, angling supported just under 3,000 full time jobs and sent \$56 million directly into provincial coffers via provincial sales tax. The impact on Manitoba's GDP was an additional \$215 million for a grand total contribution via direct spending to the Manitoba economy of \$601 million. And angling license sales are increasing every year. Ice fishing especially is booming, centred largely on Lake Winnipeg.

In terms of conservation, angling has proven to be one of the most sustainable outdoor activities there is. On Lake Winnipeg, for example, thousands of walleyes are released by anglers every year and according to creel census studies, anglers take less than 5 per cent of the walleye harvested on Lake Winnipeg. A 2018 Probe Research study of the value of the Lake Winnipeg recreational fishery was estimated to be \$221 million with many of the fish caught being released.

Commercial fishermen have every incentive to harvest as much as they can as fast as they can; again, no blame intended as their livelihoods depend on it. A study by the University of Winnipeg showed that after the 2011 collapse of walleye stocks that commercial fishermen switched to small mesh nets. The result was a

great increase in the harvest of pre-spawn walleye which went from 10 per cent of the catch in 2012 to 50 per cent of the catch in 2018. A central rule of sound fisheries management is that you protect fish until they have a chance to spawn. Implementing a minimum mesh net size has allowed smaller fish to be unharvested and left to spawn, as well assisting female walleye in reaching maturity. Once a walleye reaches maturity, energy is put more towards spawning and less towards growing. Larger mesh sizes also benefit other fish such as Goldeye and Sauger that are harvested both commercially and recreationally. I would note that on many recreational fisheries, large walleye, the valuable spawners, must be released, and that the MWF alongside our many partners advocated for the recently announced proposal by the Government to ban killing any large mature females.

All that said, Mr. Lamont's comments about MWF's supposed "focus on trophy angling and not the preservation of fish stocks" betray a fundamental lack of knowledge about sound fisheries management. It is a principle of fisheries science that the presence of large fish is a very strong indicator of a healthy fish stock. These large fish are the best breeders and stocks with large fish have many other younger fish of different ages "coming up" to ensure stable and thriving fish stocks. I might add, as well, that very few anglers these days kill large fish and only take home a few "eaters" to enjoy.

A central rule of the management of a public resource, is that governments undertake management towards the "highest and best use" for society. Or to use a colloquialism; getting the "best bang for the buck." MWF sees a parallel relationship between the fisheries economy and the science that supports its sustainability. We must trust the science, support regulation changes (both recreational and commercial), advocate for funding and resources to be put towards the Fisheries Branch to do their jobs and adhere to one management plan that will support a sustainable fishery for all. The loss of our valued fishery would be a blow to all Manitobans. It is clear for Lake Winnipeg that the allocation of fish

stocks has been evolving given the tremendous increase in the quality of angling. Does this mean that commercial fishing should be eliminated or that we should close the access to recreational fishers? Absolutely not. It means we should trust the experts and a sound management plan that will benefit all fish harvesters.

So, with all these facts at hand, the MWF makes no apologies for communicating aggressively on behalf of the sustainable use of fish and wildlife resources. And funnily enough, hunters and anglers are always asking to be taxed more and have the proceeds directed to better fish and wildlife management. The Fish and Wildlife Enhancement Fund (FWEF) was created by hunter, angler, and trapper dollars to invest in fish and wildlife conservation. In fact, let me pose a challenge to the PCFM and Mr. Lamont. Let's work together to create the commercial fishing equivalent of the FWEF. This fund could be supported by a royalty on commercially caught fish and the funds directed by the industry to ensure the sustainability of commercial fish stocks. I await your views on this, Mr. Lamont.

Regarding Mr. Lamont's comment on the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) project, it must be noted that the M in WMA stands for "management." While these designated lands provide the benefits of public use and wildlife habitat protection, over time, without land management, the landscape begins to change and what was once a productive mosaic of species slowly transforms into a monoculture of brush. Without the natural management processes that once maintained these grassland habitats persisting on the landscape (i.e., grazing bison and wildfire activity), aspen stands and woody vegetation slowly encroach on areas of native prairie, reducing grassland habitats, resulting in a loss of biodiversity.

So, Mr. Lamont's comment regarding Crown land that, according to him, is being taken away from ranchers and I quote, "they are giving it to the MWF so it can turn (WMAs) into pastures." Controlled grazing is accepted wildlife management tool and if this management tool is suited

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for a WMA, it could provide Manitoba ranchers with more grazing opportunities and garner another partner in conservation.

In summary, MWF would welcome the opportunity to work with both Mr. Lamont and the PCFM together, to support a sound management plan for all fisheries and all Manitobans. We would all benefit in the end.

Yours truly,  
Brian Brownlie, President  
Manitoba Wildlife Federation