



The Upper New River in Virginia: A Tale of Two Rivers

The Upper New River in Virginia is the 80-mile section of river from the Virginia-North Carolina state line near Mouth of Wilson in Grayson County downstream to Allisonia at the headwaters of Claytor Lake. The fishery in this section of the New River is different from the New River downstream from Claytor Lake, so it is managed separately. Fish communities in the Upper New River vary, with stocked walleye and muskie and plenty of channel and flathead catfish in the section from Fries Dam downstream to Allisonia, where river pools are deep and water is swift. Upstream from Fries Dam (pictured below), the river is shallower and slower, with fewer deep pools. In this section of the river, walleye are not stocked and fewer muskie are stocked. The fishery in this section is dominated by smallmouth bass, rock bass, and redbreast sunfish.

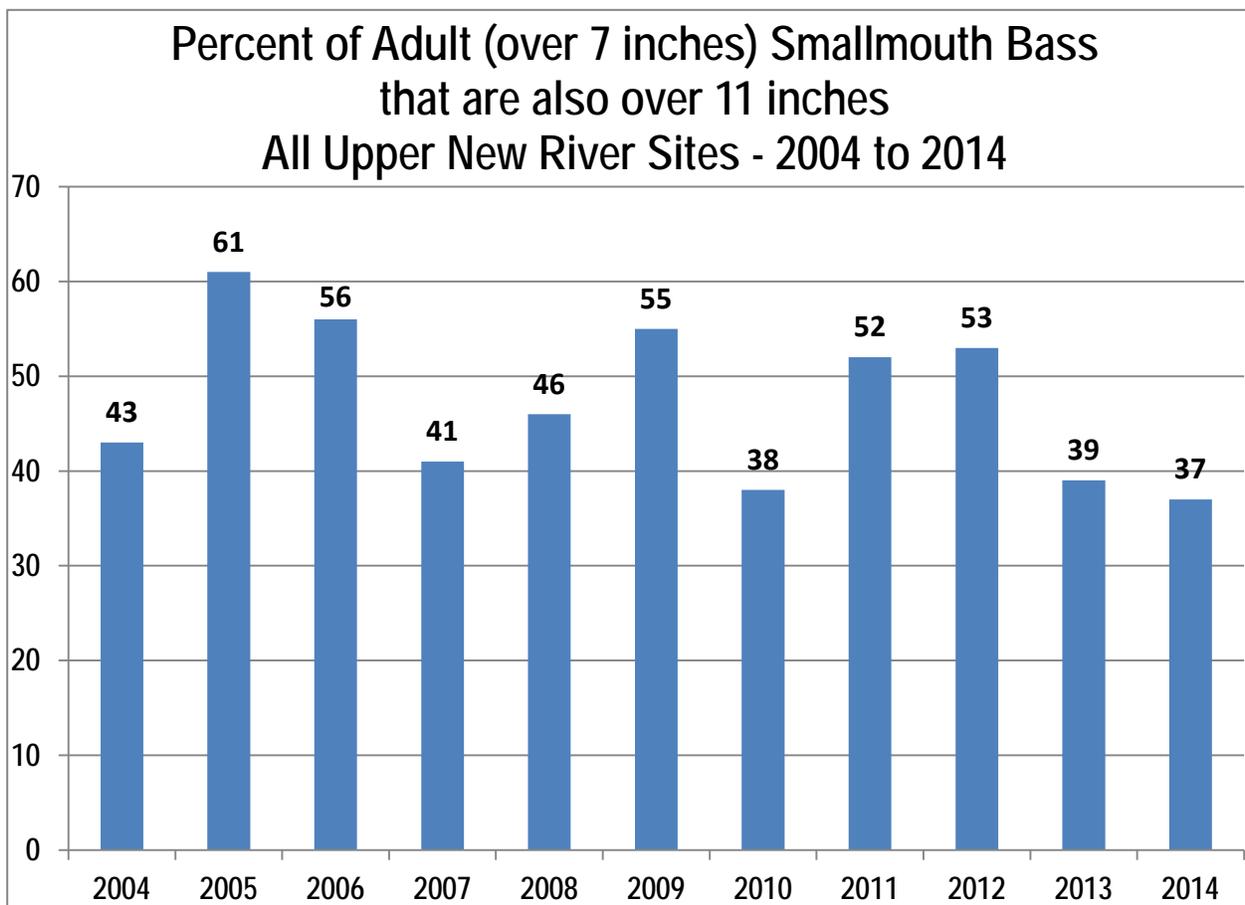


The New River upstream from Fries Dam is different from the New River from Fries Dam downstream to Claytor Lake. Fish habitat in this section is characterized by long shallow stretches of sandy bottom river broken by fewer fast moving rapids.

The age structure of the Upper New River smallmouth bass population was examined from 2001 to 2003 (see table below). Smallmouth bass ranged from age 1 to 13 years of age and have an average growth rate compared to similar river smallmouth bass populations in Virginia. An average smallmouth bass in the Upper New River takes 10 to 13 years to reach a trophy size of 20 inches. Total annual mortality is about 40%, meaning smallmouth bass numbers are reduced at a rate of 40% per year on average.

	Age 1	Age 2	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 13
Length (inches)	4.1	6.6	8.8	11.1	12.7	14.5	15.3	16.6	17.2	18.5	19.1	19.7

In spring 2014, electrofishing samples were collected at twelve sites from Allisonia upstream to Fries Dam and from Fries Dam upstream to Mouth of Wilson. This report summarizes the annual sampling results in 2014 and compares them with past sampling from 2004 to 2013. Since the Upper New River is really 2 sections of river, from Mouth of Wilson downstream to Fries Dam and from Fries Dam downstream to Claytor Lake, each section's electrofishing data is summarized separately. Upstream from Fries Dam, nearly equal numbers of smallmouth bass and rock bass were collected by electrofishing in spring 2014, with these two species being the most abundant fish in the samples, followed by redbreast sunfish and flathead catfish. Downstream from Fries Dam, smallmouth bass dominated the spring 2014 electrofishing catch, followed by rock bass, channel catfish, walleye, flathead catfish, and redbreast sunfish.



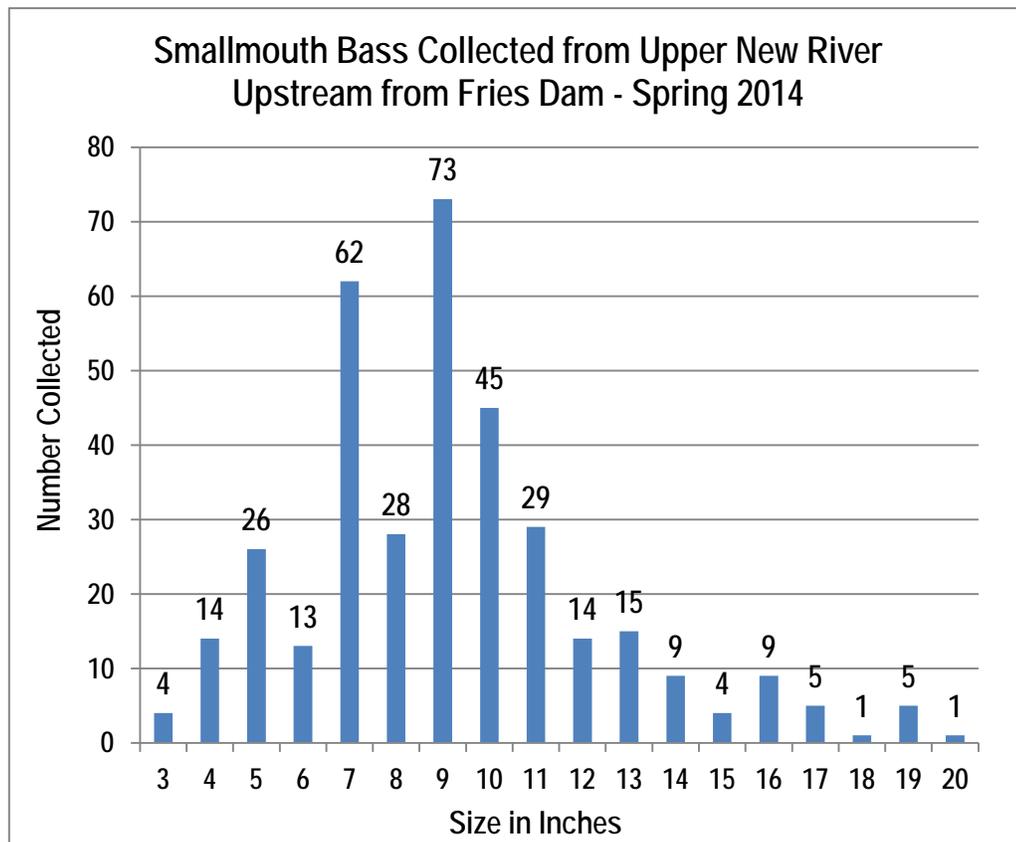
One measure of smallmouth bass population health used by fisheries biologists is called Proportional Stock Density (abbreviated PSD), an index measuring the percentage of adult smallmouth bass (over 7 inches) that are also over 11 inches. The figure above shows

smallmouth bass PSD for collections made from the entire Upper New River from 2004 to 2014. Healthy river smallmouth bass populations usually have PSD values between 40 and 60. The values below 40 in 2013 and 2014 electrofishing are due to poor smallmouth bass spawns in 2008, 2009, and 2011.

Upstream from Fries Dam

Smallmouth Bass

Between 2012 and 2014, smallmouth bass electrofishing catch in the New River upstream from Fries Dam ranged from a low of 66 (2014) to a high of 148 (2013) bass per hour of electrofishing. Catch per hour is influenced by smallmouth bass spawning and rearing success, which varies with river flow during spawning and rearing season. In low and high flow years, newly hatched river smallmouth bass do not survive as well as they do in medium flow years. VDGIF fisheries biologists determine smallmouth bass spawning success each year based on collections of Age-1 smallmouth bass in their electrofishing samples. Above average smallmouth bass spawns occurred in this section of river in 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2010, average spawns in 2005 and 2012, and below average spawns in 2008, 2009, 2011, and 2013. As a result of the average and below average spawns from 2011 to 2013, young smallmouth bass numbers are reduced in this section of river. The good news is that the above average spawn in 2010 is creating good fishing for 9 and 10 inch smallmouth bass and the above average spawns in 2004, 2006, and 2007 will provide trophy smallmouth bass catches during the next 1 to 3 years.



The size of smallmouth bass collected in spring 2014 ranged from 3 to 20 inches, with only 57 young smallmouth bass (less than 7 inches), a result of the poor smallmouth bass spawns in 2011 and 2013, and the average smallmouth bass spawn in 2012. A total of 300 adult (greater than 7 inches) smallmouth bass were collected, a lower number than recent years due to poor spawns in 2008, 2009, and 2011. The best area to find good numbers and sizes of smallmouth bass is from Fields Dam downstream to Independence.

In 2014, the smallmouth bass PSD in the New River upstream from Fries Dam was 31, which means that 31% of all adult smallmouth bass collected in 2014 were 11 inches or larger. The percentage of adult fish 14 inches or larger collected in 2014 was 13% and the percentage of adult fish that were 17 inches or larger was 5%. Healthy smallmouth bass populations generally have PSD values between 40 and 60. The value below 40 in 2014 electrofishing is due to poor smallmouth bass spawns in 2009, 2010, and 2012 in this section of river.

Body condition of smallmouth bass is measured by relative weight, which is an index of the fatness or plumpness of a fish. Relative weights around 100 indicate that fish are in good condition. Relative weights well below 100 indicate that fish are in fair to poor condition. The average relative weight or condition of smallmouth bass upstream from Fries Dam in 2014 was 89, indicating that the smallmouth bass in this section of the New River are healthy.

Rock Bass

Rock bass were the most abundant sport fish collected upstream from Fries Dam in spring 2014 electrofishing samples. Between 2012 and 2014, rock bass electrofishing catch in this section of river ranged from a low of 48 (2012) to a high of 107 (2013) rock bass per hour of electrofishing. On average, 66 rock bass were collected in one hour of spring electrofishing in 2014, which is two times the Upper New River average of 33 from 2004 to 2014. Rock bass sizes ranged from 2 to 9 inches in spring 2014, with an average size of 6 inches. One measure of rock bass population health is Proportional Stock Density (abbreviated PSD), an index measuring the percentage of adult rock bass (over 4 inches) that are also over 7 inches. Rock Bass PSD at all Upper New River sites averaged 44 from 2004 to 2013 and was 43 upstream from Fries dam in 2014, meaning approximately 43% of all rock bass in the population are 7 inches or larger. At 112, rock bass relative weights are excellent. Good areas to fish for rock bass include Old Town, Baywood, Cox's Chapel, and downstream from Fields Dam.

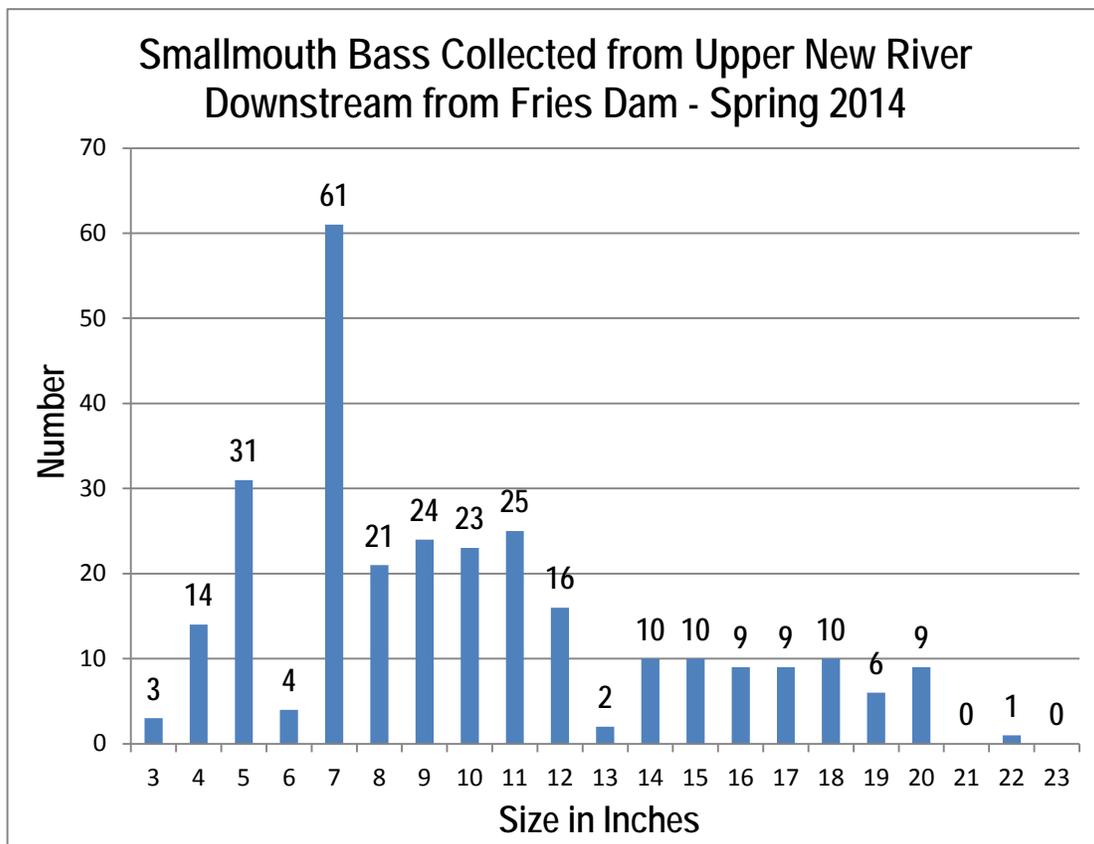
Flathead and Channel Catfish

This section of the New River does not have excellent catfish habitat, but these New River native catfish species are still found in some areas. Both species showed evidence of excellent reproduction in spring 2014 electrofishing, suggesting a bright future for anglers seeking catfish. You are likely to find them in deep slow pools near woody debris. Good places to fish for catfish are the pool upstream from Fields Dam at Mouth of Wilson and the pool upstream from Fries Dam near the Old Town boat ramp.

Downstream from Fries Dam

Smallmouth Bass

Between 2012 and 2014, smallmouth bass electrofishing catch in the New River downstream from Fries Dam ranged from a low of 39 (2014) to a high of 97 (2013) bass per hour of electrofishing. Above average smallmouth bass spawns occurred in this section of river in 2004 to 2007, 2010, and 2012, average spawns in 2006 and 2011, and below average spawns in 2008, 2009, and 2013. As a result of the average and below average spawns in 2011 and 2013, young smallmouth bass numbers are reduced in this section of river. The good news is that the above average spawns in 2010 and 2012 are creating good fishing for 7 to 12 inch smallmouth bass. The above average spawns in 2004 to 2007 are resulting in good numbers of smallmouth bass from 15 to 18 inches and will provide good trophy smallmouth bass catches during the next 1 to 3 years.



The size of smallmouth bass collected in spring 2014 ranged from 3 to 22 inches, with only 52 young smallmouth bass (less than 7 inches), as a result of the average spawns in 2011 and 2012 and the poor spawn in 2013. A total of 232 adult (greater than 7 inches) smallmouth bass were collected, a lower number than recent years due to poor spawns in 2008 and 2009, and the average spawn in 2011.

In 2014, the smallmouth bass PSD in the New River downstream from Fries Dam was 45, which means that 45% of all adult smallmouth bass collected in 2014 were 11 inches or larger, in line with what is considered a healthy range for river smallmouth bass populations

(between 40 and 60). The percentage of adult fish collected during electrofishing that were 14 inches or larger was 28, the percentage of adult fish 17 inches or larger was 17, and the percent larger than 20 inches was 4. The average relative weight or condition of smallmouth bass downstream from Fries Dam in 2014 was 90, indicating that the smallmouth bass in this section of the New River are healthy.

The bottom-line is that there are some nice smallmouth bass in this section of the river waiting to tug on the end of your line! The best area to find good numbers and sizes of smallmouth bass is from Shot Tower Falls downstream to Allisonia.



Alvin Porter of Galax is proud of this Upper New River smallmouth bass.

Rock Bass

Rock bass were the second most abundant sport fish collected downstream from Fries Dam in spring 2014 electrofishing samples, although rock bass numbers in this section are less than rock bass numbers upstream from Fries dam. Between 2012 and 2014, rock bass electrofishing catch in this section of river ranged from a low of 8 (2014) to a high of 37 (2013) rock bass per hour of electrofishing. The rock bass catch rate of 8 in spring 2014 electrofishing was 25% of the Upper New River average of 33 from 2004 to 2014. Rock bass sizes ranged from 3 to 9 inches in spring 2014, with an average size of 6 inches. One measure of rock bass population health is Proportional Stock Density (abbreviated PSD), an index measuring the percentage of adult rock bass (over 4 inches) that are also over 7 inches. Rock Bass PSD averaged 44 from 2004 to 2013 and was 27 in 2014, meaning approximately 27% of all rock bass in the population are 7 inches or larger. At 112, rock bass relative weights are excellent,

meaning they are fat and sassy when you land one! Good areas to fish for rock bass include Ivanhoe, Austinville, and Foster Falls.

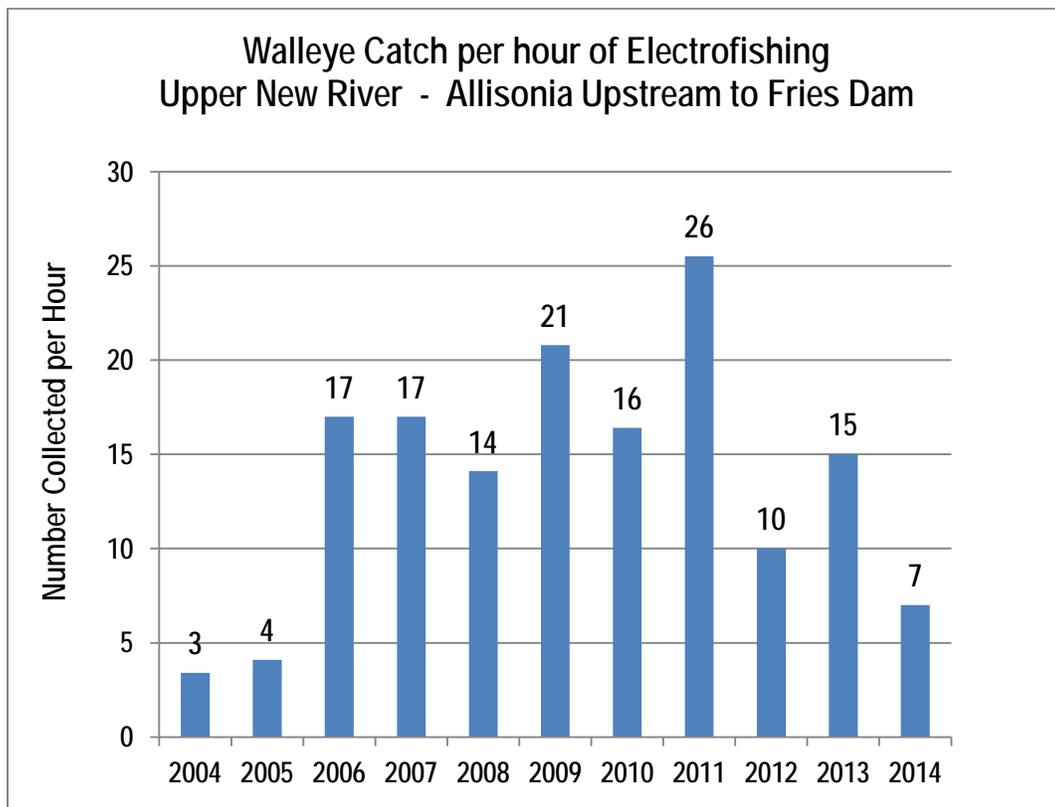
Flathead and Channel Catfish

The New River downstream from Fries Dam has excellent catfish habitat. Both species showed evidence of excellent reproduction in spring 2014 electrofishing, suggesting a bright future for anglers seeking catfish. You are likely to find them in deep slow pools near woody debris. Good places to fish for catfish are Austinville, Foster Falls, Route 100, and Allisonia.

Walleye

Walleye are a major focus of Upper New River fisheries management from Allisonia upstream to Fries dam, where they are maintained through an annual stocking program. Stocking is an important focus of this management, since New River walleye are a unique genetic strain maintained by a selective breeding program. In addition, a seasonal New River walleye size and creel limit provides protection for female fish that could begin spawning and maintain the population without stocking.

Walleye catch in this section of river was steady from 2006 to 2010 with increased stocking of New River walleye. The figure below shows the total catch of walleye per hour of electrofishing from below Fries dam downstream to Allisonia from 2004 to 2014. Walleye stocking was suspended in 2012 and 2013 to determine whether natural reproduction was occurring. As you might suspect from the decline in the walleye electrofishing catch rate during those years, walleye are not reproducing enough on their own to maintain this fishery, so walleye stocking began again in 2014.



Walleye collected in spring 2014 electrofishing ranged from 13 to 29 inches, with an average size of 17 inches. Walleye Proportional Stock Density (abbreviated PSD) is an index that measures the percentage of adult fish (over 10 inches) in the population that are also over 15 inches. Walleye PSD averaged 60 from 2005 to 2012, reflecting consistent numbers of walleye over 10 inches entering the adult population. In 2013 and 2014, walleye PSD increased to an average of 95, reflecting the lack of adult fish entering the population from stocking. In spring 2014 electrofishing samples, 61% of all walleye collected were 15 to 19 inches long (stocked in 2010 and 2011) and 37% were 19 to 28 inches long (stocked from 2006 to 2009). The condition of walleye measured by average relative weight was 84 in 2014, indicating that walleye are in healthy condition. In 2014, approximately 40,612 New River walleye were stocked in the Upper New River at the headwaters of Claytor Lake. These young walleye should move upstream to Foster Falls and Ivanhoe during the spring of 2015.

Fishing the Upper New River in 2015:

One important note regarding this fishery is the new bass size limit in 2015. Effective January 1, 2015, from Fields Dam in Grayson County downstream to the Virginia/West Virginia State Line (not including Claytor Lake), the bass size limit will be a 14 to 22 inch restricted slot limit, requiring release of all bass from 14 to 22 inches. The bass creel limit remains 5 per day, with one bass per day allowed over 22 inches.

Abundant young smallmouth bass will contribute to angler catches in 2015 with good numbers of 7 to 14 inch fish and excellent numbers of 14 to 22 inch bass available. Walleye fishing is best from Buck Dam to Allisonia where the Department concentrates its stocking efforts. Anglers catch good numbers of walleye in this section from February to May, with Foster Falls a prime location. Rock bass and redbreast sunfish provide fun fishing opportunities, particularly from Mouth of Wilson to Fries where these sunfish are more numerous. Muskie populations have increased from Ivanhoe to Allisonia, offering opportunities to catch a trophy that will light up your lure!

Future Fisheries Management Plans:

Walleye fingerlings will continue to be stocked and monitored in an ongoing effort to increase the abundance of walleye from Fries Dam downstream to Allisonia. Game fish will be monitored annually in the spring months using electrofishing.

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