



FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN | 2022-2031



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FRESNO RESERVOIR



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2022-2031

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FRESNO RESERVOIR FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fresno Reservoir, a 5,100-acre reservoir in North Central Montana has been a popular fishery following impoundment in 1939. This mainstem reservoir on the Milk River supports an average of 12,350 angler days annually since 2001 and is currently ranked as the 5th most heavily fished waterbody in FWP Region 6 and 63rd most heavily fished waterbody in the state of Montana.

The Fresno fishery has been managed primarily for walleye since 1957 when walleye were first stocked. Since 2003, hatchery reared walleyes had been stocked in the reservoir with little regard for forage and other sport fish. In 2012, an evaluation was completed by FWP that indicated wild walleye reproduction and recruitment was significant. Declining Proportional Stock Densities (PSD) following record high relative abundance in gillnets (2010) suggested that cessation of walleye stocking and relying on wild walleye reproduction would lower relative abundance and potentially improve PSD. A concurrent goal of this management action was to reduce predation on the limited forage base. The management goal under this no-stocking strategy was: **Maintain a balanced fish community that promotes walleye growth, age and size structure while ensuring a sustainable forage base.**

Under this strategy, walleye relative abundance decreased from an average 24/net (06'-13') to 17/net (14'-current). Relative weight of walleye continued to decline until 2017 (82.5) when it started to increase. PSD's continued to decline after 2011 reaching a record low of 24 in 2015. This metric increased to 61 in 2017 and has since declined to 38 in 2020.

In 2020, a petition was circulated in the Havre area requesting that FWP stock fish in Fresno Reservoir. This resulted in a public meeting on April 12, 2020 where over 60 interested individuals were in attendance. The outcome of this meeting was the impetus for FWP to initiate a Fisheries Management Plan process that relied heavily on public involvement to guide management decisions.

FWP solicited applications to serve on a Fresno Fisheries Management Plan Advisory Committee. This group would represent the following interests;

- Local Walleye anglers
- Out of area Walleye anglers
- General anglers/kids
- Local Government
- Local Business

Nine applications were received by the deadline of February 16th, 2021 and all nine were accepted to serve on the Advisory Committee. In addition, representatives from Bureau of Reclamation and St. Mary Working Group served as technical advisors to the plan.

An initial survey was completed by the Advisory Committee to prioritize issues that would be addressed during the planning process. Listed are issues ranked in order of importance by the Advisory Committee.

1. Walleye stocking
2. Water level management
3. Perch stocking, fish habitat, Fresno water designation (Fish and Wildlife)
4. Forage stocking
5. Rainbow stocking, Fish cleaning station

Over the course of four meetings, The Advisory Committee, in concert with FWP, developed the following fisheries management objectives for Fresno Reservoir. The overarching goal of the Advisory

Committee for the Fresno fishery was to improve angler catch rates for walleye. This will be achieved through the stocking of hatchery fish that will supplement wild walleye reproduction.

The Management Goal under this Plan is: **The Fresno Reservoir fisheries will be managed as a walleye fishery with the primary goal of high angler catch rates for Stock (10-15") and Quality (15-20") walleye. This will be accomplished by stocking hatchery walleye to augment the wild walleye population. An emphasis will be placed on habitat enhancement efforts to support other species of interest (yellow perch, black crappie and forage species).**

Under this Management Goal, angler harvest of walleyes will be essential to maintain a healthy fishery.

I. SUMMARY OF MANAGEMENT PLAN

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Management objectives for walleye:

1. Place the primary management emphasis on walleye. Utilize natural reproduction and hatchery stocked walleye fingerlings.
 - a. **Abundance goal:** maintain an average annual relative abundance of 18-21 walleye per net during fall gillnetting surveys.
2. Walleye condition: (this is a measure of “plumpness” and also indicates forage surplus or shortages).
 - a. **Walleye health goal:** maintain walleye relative weight greater than 85.
3. Size structure of the walleye population (this is a ratio of Quality (walleyes greater than 15”) to Stock (walleyes greater than 10”). A population size structure between 30 and 60 is considered balanced.
 - a. **Walleye size structure goal:** maintain a proportional size distribution (PSD) between 30-60.
4. Management Actions;
 - a. Stock 50,000 marked walleye fingerlings (if available) starting in 2021.
 - b. Increase to 75,000 marked walleye fingerlings (if available) in 2022.
 - c. Stocking rates may be altered by biological and environmental conditions. (See full description of walleye stocking on page 19).
 - d. Continue to evaluate hatchery walleye fingerling survival, recruitment and contributions to angler catch rates.
5. Walleye Limits: 5 daily and 10 in possession (current Eastern District Standard)
 - a. If walleye relative abundance exceeds 21 walleye/net and average walleye relative weight falls below 85 and walleye PSD falls below 30, FWP will consider increased walleye daily and possession limits until relative abundance objective is reduced to 21 or less.
6. Angler catch rate target;
 - a. A defined angler catch rate target was not developed during this planning process. This is due to the high variability in angler skill and resultant catch rates and irregular creel surveys implemented by FWP on Fresno Reservoir. Angler creel data will be collected periodically throughout the plan and used to guide planning decisions.

Management objectives for northern pike:

1. **Abundance Goal;** maintain an average annual 2-4 northern pike per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Rely on natural reproduction and survival to determine population relative abundance.
3. Northern Pike Limits: 10 daily and in possession.

- a. If northern pike relative abundance exceeds 4 northern pike/net, FWP will consider increasing the daily limit for northern pike until relative abundance is reduced to 4/net or less.

Management objectives for yellow perch:

1. **Abundance Goal;** maintain an average annual 2-4 yellow perch per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Management Actions:
 - a. Rely primarily on natural reproduction and survival to determine population relative abundance.
 - b. If available and water levels exceed 2567.0 in April, transfer pre-spawn adult yellow perch in the spring to increase spawning stock.
 - i. Identify disease-free sources of adult yellow perch near Fresno Reservoir.
 - c. Continue habitat enhancement program using discarded Christmas trees to enhance yellow perch spawning and rearing habitat.
 - d. In addition to Christmas trees, explore other methods of habitat enhancement to benefit yellow perch populations.
 - e. Stock hatchery reared yellow perch if available.
3. Yellow Perch Limits: there is no daily or possession limit for yellow perch in the Eastern Fishing District.
 - a. Evaluate daily and possession limits for yellow perch on Fresno Reservoir.

Management objectives for black crappie:

1. **Abundance Goal:** maintain an average annual 1-2 black crappie per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Management Actions;
 - a. Rely on natural reproduction and survival to determine population relative abundance.
 - b. Utilize discarded Christmas trees to enhance crappie rearing habitat.
 - c. Stock hatchery reared black crappie if available.
 - d. Identify a disease-free source of black crappie near Fresno Reservoir.
3. Crappie Limits: 15 daily and 30 in possession (Eastern District Standard).

Management objectives for shoreline forage fish:

1. **Abundance Goal:** maintain an average annual 100-200+ shoreline forage fish (includes young-of year yellow perch, young-of year black crappie, spottail shiner and emerald shiner) per seine haul.
 - a. Monitoring of shoreline forage fish populations is done through standardized annual beach seining surveys conducted in late summer.
2. Continue to work with Reclamation on formalizing water level recommendations that benefit the fisheries and aquatic resources in Fresno Reservoir.

The following water elevations and time periods are important for the fishery:

- a. Favorable spawning conditions for yellow perch occur when pool elevations are greater than 2565.0 during April and May. Maximum production occurs when reservoir levels are stable or increasing during these months.
 - b. Black crappie and spottail shiners spawning conditions are maximized when pool elevations are greater than 2570.0 during May and June.
 - c. Obtain overwinter pool elevations that submerge a high percentage of critical rock/cobble substrate for young of year fishes to seek refuge from predators.
 - d. Pool elevations below 2555.0 have been shown to be extremely detrimental to the entire fish community in Fresno Reservoir.
3. Management Actions;
- a. Utilize discarded Christmas trees to increase nearshore spawning and rearing habitat.
 - b. Explore additional habitat enhancement to benefit nearshore spawning and rearing of forage species under variable water levels.
 - c. Investigate alternative forage fish introductions into Fresno Reservoir. The evaluation would determine potential alternative forage specie(s) and assess the positive and negative impacts associated with an introduction to the species assemblage currently found in Fresno Reservoir. This would be completed through writing an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement (in full compliance with Montana Environmental Policy Act requirements). New species evaluation would include consultation with Alberta Ministry of Environment and Parks.

Management objectives for rainbow trout:

- 1. No rainbow trout stocking will occur for the duration of the Plan.

Management objectives for Milk River fish assemblage upstream of Fresno Reservoir:

- 1. Maintain a fish assemblage primarily comprised of native species.
- 2. Monitor relative abundance of these species through a variety of gear types.
- 3. Improve understanding of species assemblages and how they are influenced by Milk River flows and habitat.

Management objectives for Milk River fish assemblage immediately downstream of Fresno Reservoir from Fresno Dam to the Havre Water Weir:

- 1. Enhance angler catch rates and opportunity in this section of the Milk River.
 - a. Increases in walleye abundance in Fresno Reservoir will increase the number of walleye entrained/flushed below the dam and available to anglers fishing the river.
 - b. Explore additional access improvements and opportunities in this section of the Milk River.
- 2. Monitor relative abundance of the fish assemblage through a variety of gear types.
 - a. Monitor gamefish abundance as it relates to Fresno Reservoir population trends, specifically walleye and northern pike.
 - b. Evaluate potential impacts of increased predator densities on native fish species and assemblages located downstream of Fresno Dam.

3. Improve understanding of species assemblages and how they are influenced by Milk River flows and habitat.

Management objectives for fishing tournaments:

1. There will be no limit on the number of tournaments that can be scheduled annually on Fresno Reservoir.
 - a. Contests may not be scheduled on holiday weekends, including but not limited to (Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day).
 - b. Encourage summer walleye tournaments to employ Catch, Photo, Release format. Any walleye catch and release tournaments with weigh-in type format will be limited to cool weather periods. May-June 15th, or after September 15th.
 - c. No tournaments will be permitted during the month of April to avoid impacts to walleye during the spawning period.
 - d. Tournaments may be cancelled if summer reservoir waters levels drop below elevation 2555.0.
 - e. As of the writing of the Plan, the Advisory Committee felt there wasn't a need to limit the number of tournaments. However, this will be reviewed annually to determine if there is a need to establish a limit.
2. Tournaments will be reviewed on an individual basis with regulatory authority Montana Code Annotated 87-3-121, MCA and ARM 12.7.8. Evaluation of proposed tournaments will include potential biological and social aspects. Proposed tournaments will undergo a 30-day public review and comment period.
3. Tournament directors will be required to report post-tournament catch rate information in a standardized format.

Management objectives for aquatic invasive species:

1. Inspect, clean and dry sampling gear to reduce the spread of AIS during FWP sampling surveys.
2. Work with FWP Aquatic Nuisance Species Coordinator to coordinate annual water/AIS testing in Fresno Reservoir and boat-check and boat washing stations during periods of high angler use.

Management objectives for fishing and recreational access:

1. Work with Reclamation, angling groups, local business and other civic organizations to explore potential construction and maintenance of a fish cleaning station at Fresno Reservoir.
2. Continue to encourage and cooperate with Reclamation, FCWU, and other partners in the development of recreational access areas. Although FWP doesn't own or control any recreational facilities on the lands surrounding Fresno Reservoir they would participate in a supporting role.
3. Once Reclamation recreation staff are hired, work cooperatively with Reclamation on developing a Recreation Plan at Fresno Reservoir.

Management objectives for habitat enhancement:

1. Work collaboratively with Reclamation on reservoir water levels that promote and enhance the availability of diverse aquatic habitats in Fresno Reservoir.
2. Continue utilizing discarded Christmas trees annually to increase nearshore spawning and rearing habitat.
3. Explore additional habitat enhancement projects that benefit nearshore spawning and rearing habitats to increase forage production and diversity under variable water levels.
4. Explore additional habitat enhancement projects targeting deep-water basin areas that provide additional rearing habitat for juvenile fishes during periods of low water levels.
5. Explore options for protecting and enhancing terrestrial vegetation along shorelines during periods of low water levels.

II. INTRODUCTION

Fresno Reservoir in North Central Montana has been a popular fishery following impoundment in 1939. This mainstem reservoir on the Milk River typically supports an average of 12,350 angler days annually since 2001, generating approximately \$1 million to the local economy and is currently ranked 5th regionally and 63rd statewide for angling pressure. The majority of angling pressure comes from local (Hill County-73%) anglers, with surrounding communities rounding out the top 3 (Cascade - 9.7%, Blaine - 4.7%, Choteau counties - 2.3%). In most years the bulk (75%) of the angling pressure occurs in the summer months with limited ice fishing activity.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) recognizes the public's interests in natural resource issues and strong desire to be involved in the decision-making process regarding management of fish and wildlife resources. FWP utilized a diverse nine-member Advisory Committee to develop the draft plan. The Advisory Committee was comprised of individuals representing both local and out of area walleye interests, local business, local government and general/kids angling. This is the first Fisheries Management Plan developed for Fresno Reservoir that included a high level of public participation and involvement in the planning process and will undergo FWP Commission Endorsement.

This planning process involves several stages. The first was identifying members to serve on an Advisory Committee to assist in the development of the Plan (Appendix B). Additionally, representatives from US Bureau of Reclamation and Milk River Joint Board of Control were invited to serve as technical advisors to the development of the Plan. One virtual and three in-person meetings were held with the Advisory Committee, technical advisors, and FWP. These meetings were facilitated by FWP and identified management priorities followed by the development of fishery goals and objectives. The Advisory Committee in concert with FWP drafted the Plan which was reviewed and endorsed by the Advisory Committee. The Plan then underwent internal FWP and affected-agency review after which comments were incorporated into the draft Plan.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) requires state government to be accountable to the people of Montana when it makes decisions that affect the human environment. MEPA provides a process to help ensure that government actions are based on informed decisions. It does this by requiring that reasonable alternatives are evaluated, the consequences of a decision are understood, and the public's concerns are known. MEPA requires all state agencies to recognize and consider to the fullest extent possible the consequences that their actions may have on the quality of the human environment (75-1-201, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)) and directs them to: 1) Utilize a systematic, interdisciplinary approach which will ensure the integrated use of the natural sciences and the environmental design arts in planning and decision making which may have an impact on the environment; and 2) Develop methods and procedures

which will ensure that environmental values and amenities are identified and may be given appropriate consideration in decision making along with economic and technical considerations.

MEPA requires FWP to issue a draft Management Plan, encourage and accept public comments on the draft and issue a final Management Plan. Montana FWP has followed this framework while developing Management Plans on the Upper Missouri River Reservoirs and Fort Peck and will follow a similar process for this plan. The draft Fresno Fisheries Management Plan presents an integrated and interdisciplinary analysis of administrative alternatives for management of Fresno Reservoir. This document describes the proposed action and evaluates potential consequences on the physical environment. Analyses of impacts presented in this document were based on literature research, public comments, and interviews with FWP personnel.

The draft Plan will be released to the public for a minimum 30-day public comment period (Appendix R). FWP will address and incorporate substantive comments into the tentative Plan. The tentative Plan will be presented to the FWP Commission for final approval in October 2021. In the final phase the FWP Commission will review any appeals and the Plan is amended as necessary. The final Plan will be published in early 2022.

III. PLAN ADAPTABILITY

The Plan, once completed and adopted by the FWP Commission, will guide fisheries management on Fresno Reservoir for a 10-year period (2022-2031) with a 5-year review of the plan occurring in 2026. Public outreach and engagement is an important component of the Plan; FWP will host an informational meeting annually in late winter/early spring to provide the Fresno Reservoir Advisory Committee and the public with an update on the status of the fishery. In the event that circumstances require significant changes to the Plan during this period, the Plan may be amended. These changes, prior to being implemented, will undergo public review and comment. This is to ensure compliance with MEPA requirements for public notice. In addition, any proposed changes will be presented to the Region 6 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). The FWP Commission will need to review and adopt any changes to the Plan that are deemed a significant deviation from the intent and direction of the original Plan.

The CAC is comprised of interested citizens representing a variety of interests across Region 6. The Advisory Committee will monitor implementation of the Fresno Fisheries Management Plan. Periodic updates of the Plan will be presented to the CAC to ensure the management actions reflect the goals and objectives presented in the Plan.

The Plan reflects the public's desire for a high catch rate, walleye focused fishery in Fresno Reservoir. Additionally, this Plan represents a change of course in fisheries management that has been in place since 2011. Specifically, increasing walleye densities through stocking of hatchery fish that will augment wild walleye reproduction. This will result in increased intra and interspecific competition in the Fresno fish community with the specific goal of increasing angler catch rates for walleye. A critical element to the success of this management approach will be angler harvest. High angler harvest is necessary to reduce walleye abundance thereby reducing predation on the limited forage base and freeing up food for remaining walleyes to survive and grow. Additionally, harvest on walleye and possibly northern pike will be required if goals for yellow perch, black crappie and forage fish are to be maintained.

IV. BACKGROUND ON FRESNO RESERVOIR FISHERY

The headwaters of the Upper Milk River are in Montana. The Milk River then flows approximately 105 miles through Alberta before re-entering Montana in Hill County, approximately 34-miles upstream of the Fresno Reservoir headwaters (Appendix A). This section of the Milk River consists of badlands, native grasses, sagebrush, and shrub/forest landscapes located primarily on federal lands. The Upper Milk area encompasses approximately 2,100 square miles. Fresno Reservoir is located 12 miles northwest of Havre, built in 1939 for irrigation purposes along the Milk River as part of the Milk River Project (Simonds 1998).

The water supply for the Milk River Project is managed by the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the Milk River Joint Board of Control. The water supply is supplemented by water from the St. Mary River watershed. A portion of the St. Mary watershed water is stored in Lake Sherburne, located in Glacier National Park. Water is released from Lake Sherburne into the St. Mary River and then diverted into the 29-mile long St. Mary Canal and discharged into the north fork of the Milk River. Water continues along the Milk River into Canada and travels more than 200-miles through Alberta before re-entering the United States. After re-entering the United States, the water flows into Fresno Reservoir where it is stored until needed for irrigation (Simonds 1998). Water from the project is used to irrigate 120,000 acres located downstream of Fresno Dam, as well as providing municipal water and flood control to several communities located downstream (Simonds 1998). Duffield (2006) found that the recreational benefits associated with the fish and wildlife resources throughout the Milk River system range from \$6 million to \$12 million dollars annually.

Fresno Reservoir is a 5,100-surface acre on-stream reservoir with highly variable water levels, regularly fluctuating 10-20+ feet per year with an annual water retention rate of 117 (\pm 40) days (storage capacity (acre-feet)/average annual inflows (acre-feet)). The timing of this fluctuation greatly influences the reproductive success, vulnerability to predation, and overall survival of forage and sport fish. Low water retention increases the rate in which nutrients are flushed, which hinders the overall productivity to the fish community in Fresno Reservoir. The fluctuating water levels help keep littoral rock and gravel (walleye spawning substrates) clean, which benefits natural reproduction. However, the fluctuating water levels restricts the growth of aquatic vegetation and reduces the inundation time when establishment occurs. The vegetation is important rearing habitat for juvenile game and forage fishes, when available.

Sedimentation in Fresno Reservoir has reduced the overall storage capacity. A recent study projected Fresno Reservoirs storage capacity to approach 62,000 acre-feet (AF) by the year 2050, less than one-half of its original storage of 130,000 AF in 1939 (Bureau of Reclamation 2012). The current storage capacity is approximately 92,000 AF.

Fresno was initially managed as a rainbow trout fishery in the 1940's and 50's, however an introduction of northern pike in the 1940's resulted in a severe decline in the rainbow trout fishery. As a result, Fresno has since been managed as a warm-water fishery supporting walleye, northern pike, yellow perch, black crappie, lake whitefish, emerald shiner and spottail shiner.

V. MANAGEMENT AGENCIES AND AUTHORITIES

The following agencies and stakeholders are involved in the management of Fresno Reservoir and the Milk River Project. A brief description of their management authorities and activities is provided.

Bureau of Reclamation

Reclamation was responsible for the original construction of Fresno Reservoir under the National Industrial Recovery Act. Reclamation continues to own and operate the facility under authority of the Milk River Project (1903) with emphasis on agricultural production (irrigation), municipal use and flood control.

The Milk River (Project) includes Lake Sherburne Dam, Swift Current Creek Dike, St. Mary Diversion Dam, St. Mary Canal, Fresno Dam, Nelson Dikes, Dodson, Vandalia and Paradise Diversion Dams, Dodson Pumping Plant, 200 miles of canals, 219 miles of laterals and 295 miles of drains. The Project provides irrigation water for about 120,000 acres within the Milk River basin over a distance of about 165 miles starting near Havre and going to a point 6 miles below Nashua.

Reclamation maintains five recreational areas consisting of primitive campgrounds and vault toilets around Fresno Reservoir.

Milk River Joint Board of Control and Other Water Users

Alfalfa Valley, Ft. Belknap, Harlem, Paradise Valley and Zurich Irrigation Districts own and operate all of the irrigation facilities within the Chinook Division, with the exception of the Paradise Diversion Dam, which is owned by Reclamation but operated by Paradise Valley Irrigation District. Reclamation holds title to all the irrigation facilities within the Malta Division, Dodson Unit and Glasgow Division, but contracted with Malta, Dodson and Glasgow Irrigation Districts to perform operation and maintenance. In addition to Harlem Irrigation District, these seven irrigation districts form the Milk River Joint Board of Control.

The Ft. Belknap Indian Irrigation Project is owned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, operated by Fort Belknap Indian Community and receives an allocation of Fresno Reservoir storage for irrigation of about 10,425 acres. The cities of Havre, Chinook, Harlem, and the Hill County Rural Water Project receive municipal water supply from Fresno Reservoir. Reclamation has participated in Source Water Protection planning efforts with local municipalities and water districts to develop management plans for the protection of the public drinking water supply.

Two very active water user groups in the Milk River basin are the St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group and the Milk River Watershed Alliance. The St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group is made up of 16 volunteer members representing irrigation, Blackfeet Tribe, and Ft. Belknap Indian Community, municipalities, recreation/fisheries, economic development, and county government. The Milk River Watershed Alliance is a locally led organization of Conservation Districts working together to preserve, protect, and enhance the natural resources within the Milk River Watershed, while maintaining the quality of life.

Local Agencies

Reclamation occasionally issues permits to other agencies, angling groups and private individuals to manage recreation sites and cabin leases on the reservoir. Recreation facilities such as the Fresno Chapter of Walleyes campground and pavilion area and boat docks are operated and maintained by the Fresno Chapter of Walleye Unlimited.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

The Fresno Reservoir fishery is managed by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) through the Region Six Fisheries Division. The Department also manages a State Recreation Area located

on lands leased from the Federal Government. The Fresno Tailwaters Fishing Access Site, immediately downstream of Fresno Dam on the Milk River is managed by FWP.

Partnership Efforts

Various projects have been implemented over the years to improve access and aquatic habitat at Fresno Reservoir through joint efforts of local and federal agencies, Fresno Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited and FWP. Various local, state and federal funds were used to accomplish this work. The projects included work on access roads in the Kiehn's and Boat Dock Bay areas. Boat ramp repairs and maintenance at the Main Ramp, near Fresno Dam. Collection, construction and deployment of discarded Christmas trees to improve nearshore spawning and rearing habitat throughout the reservoir for juvenile sport and forage species.

VI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN

Public involvement components are detailed below in chronological order.

Fresno Management Plan Advisory Committee

A call for applicants representing a variety of interest groups began in February 2021 with the goal of assembling a group that would provide recommendations to FWP and assist with developing guidelines for management of the Fresno Reservoir fishery. A series of press releases, social media posts and FWP's website were used to solicit public participation on the Advisory Committee. Nine applications were received, and all nine applicants were invited to serve on the Advisory Committee. The members of the Committee represented the following interest groups:

- local walleye angler (Havre Area)
- out-of-area walleye angler
- general angler/kid's fishing
- local government
- local business
- In addition, a representative from Reclamation and the St. Mary's Working Group were asked to serve as technical advisors to the planning process

The nine individuals that participated in the plan and the interests they represented are listed in Appendix B.

A total of four meetings (one virtual and three in-person) were held with the Advisory Committee and technical advisors to develop management goals and objectives for the Plan. The following were identified as the primary issues and concerns surrounding the Fresno fishery: walleye stocking strategies, (non-walleye) fish stocking strategies, fishing regulations, bait use regulations, habitat enhancement, fish cleaning station, angling tournaments and reservoir water level management.

A goal statement was developed with the Advisory Committee to help guide the direction of this Plan and the Fresno fishery. It states;

The Fresno Reservoir fisheries will be managed as a walleye fishery with the primary goal of high angler catch rates for Stock (10-15") and Quality (15-20") walleye. This will be accomplished by stocking hatchery walleye to augment the wild walleye population. An emphasis will be placed on habitat enhancement efforts to support other species of interest (yellow perch, black crappie and forage species).

Public Review of Draft Plan and Scoping Meetings

Public comments on the draft Fresno Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan were accepted during the open comment period from August 1st to August 31st, 2021 (Appendix R). The public was notified of this opportunity through numerous press releases, social media posts and radio announcements. The Draft Plan was made available at FWP offices in Havre and Glasgow, and online on the FWP website (A list of public outreach and public meetings are listed in Appendix Q).

An Open House was held in Havre on August 16th at the Best Western Plus. Public comments were accepted at this public meeting and also accepted at the Glasgow and Havre FWP offices. Additionally, public comments were also accepted through email and postmarked letters to FWP Region 6 headquarters in Glasgow and the Havre Area Office.

Press releases, radio, and/or social media announcements were completed in advance of the review and comment period to notify the public of the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department.

Final Plan

The tentative Plan will be presented to the FWP Commission at its October meeting. Comments registered at this Commission Meeting will be addressed and/or incorporated into the Plan.

VII. FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Fresno Reservoir and the Milk River upstream of Fresno Dam consists of a number of both native and non-native fish species (Appendix C). Eleven species have been introduced to develop forage and sport-fishing opportunities, with varying success on survival and recruitment. Fish populations and management efforts will continue to be heavily influenced by water management, and the timing and severity of water fluctuations within Fresno Reservoir. FWP will strive to maintain and enhance diverse gamefish opportunities, while recognizing the important contributions forage species provide to the Fresno Reservoir fishery.

A major challenge for fishery managers in multi-species fisheries is to be responsive to change without over-reacting to fluctuating data trends. Averaging population trend data based on standardized surveys (i.e. three or five-year running average) is commonly used by managers to balance responsive and cautious approaches.

The Fresno Fisheries Management Plan will use standardized survey results annually to evaluate and identify whether management plan goals are being met. Management decisions will typically be based on multiple years (2 to 3 years) of survey results to accurately evaluate population trends. Management changes (such as stocking rates or regulation changes) often take time to measure population level impacts, so continued monitoring will be essential to determine how management changes effect fish populations. For example, it's expected to take a minimum of two years for the initial walleye plants to grow and recruit into netting surveys used to measure the success and contribution of walleye stocked in 2021 to the Fresno walleye population. FWP will report measurable changes annually to the Fresno Advisory Committee, Region Six Citizen Advisory Committee, at public meetings, and provide annual reports. A list of sampling gears that will be used are found in Appendix O.

Throughout this Plan, fisheries information is analyzed and presented on a species by species basis. Each section will address species specific fisheries data, angler's desire and recommended management actions.

Walleye

Walleye were first introduced into Fresno in 1957. Historically, Fresno has maintained good to excellent walleye production since the 1980's. From 1987-2000 the walleye population in Fresno was sustained primarily through natural reproduction, with several small supplemental stocking events taking place (Appendix D and E). Severe drought conditions greatly reduced water conditions in Fresno Reservoir from 2000-2005 and impacted walleye relative abundance and relative weight (Gilge 2005). During this period walleye relative abundance averaged 4.0 walleye/net and spring spawning conditions and forage densities were poor. Annual stocking of walleye fingerlings was initiated in 2003 to supplement the depleted walleye densities (Appendix D). Water conditions started to improve in 2007 and maintained above average pool elevations through 2020, with three severe water drawdowns occurring during the summers of 2017, 2020 and 2021.

The adult walleye population in Fresno is primarily comprised of stock (10-14.9") and quality (15-19.9") sized fish (Appendix F). Memorable sized walleye (> 25") are found in the reservoir but have historically been observed in low densities and frequency. Relative weight (Wr) is a metric used to indicate fish condition or plumpness (Murphy et al. 1990). Walleye Wr has fluctuated over time and based on data collected is directly influenced by forage availability, predator abundances and reservoir water conditions (Appendix G).

Walleye growth in Fresno is very good at the early life stages. On average, walleye obtain a length of 15 inches by age-3 and then growth begins to slow, with walleye obtaining 20 inches around age-8-10 (Appendix I). Rapid growth rates observed during the early life stages suggest zooplankton production and the availability of smaller forage items (invertebrates/small fishes) are present in high abundance in most years. Reduced growth rates at the larger sizes suggest availability of preferred forage items (large bodied fish such as adult yellow perch) are limited in most years. It's expected to take a minimum of two years to observe responses from stocking on the Fresno walleye population as these fish mature and recruit to sampling gear.

Proportional size distribution (PSD) is a fisheries evaluation technique used to quantify the relationship between population abundance and fish size distribution. This fisheries management tool is commonly used to indicate sport fish population size structure balance (Gablehouse 1984). The value for walleye is determined from a population survey by dividing the total number of fish surveyed greater than 15-inches by the total number of fish surveyed greater than 10-inches, multiplied by 100. Generally, a value from 0-30 indicates a population comprised primarily of small, younger aged walleye, 30-60 indicates a balanced population comprised of all sizes and multiple age classes, and 60-100 indicates a population comprised primarily of large, older aged walleye. For Fresno, a PSD goal range of 30 to 60 has been established to evaluate size structure balance. Since 1998, walleye PSD has varied greatly, obtaining a PSD value between 30-60 in 10 of the last 23 years (Appendix H).

Annual walleye fingerling stocking at high densities (100,000-200,000) occurred from 2003-2011 and walleye survival and abundance achieved all-time highs, with the average walleye relative abundance obtaining 23.9 WE/net during that time (Appendix F). From 2006-2011, all walleye fingerlings stocked into Fresno were marked with Terramycin 343 soluble powder (OTC) to allow identification of hatchery versus wild reproduced walleye. The evaluation identified successful returns on the walleye being stocked, with an average 44% of the adult walleye captured during fall sampling surveys testing OTC positive (hatchery walleye). The evaluation also identified good walleye natural reproduction in Fresno, when conditions were favorable, with 56% of the adults sampled testing OTC negative (Nagel 2011).

The high stocking rate led to concerns about the growth and size structure of walleye in Fresno, and the long-term sustainability of the forage base under high walleye densities. Walleye relative abundance went

from 5 WE/net in 2005 to over 25 WE/net in 2007 and was comprised mostly of walleye less than 14 inches (Appendix F). Walleye relative abundance remained above 20 WE/net through 2012 and peaked at 29.5 WE/net in 2013 (Appendix F). Walleye size structure during this period was comprised mostly of Stock sized walleye (10-14.9") which comprised the majority of the angler catch. From 2005-2014 walleye PSD obtained 30 or higher in 4 of the 10 years, peaking at 39 in 2010 (Appendix H). Average walleye relative weight peaked in 2010 and then began to drop annually, indicating forage production was no longer sustaining the increased walleye population.

These population indicators prompted FWP to suspend the annual stocking of 100,000 walleye fingerlings in 2012 (Appendix D). This management action was made to increase the walleye size structure, balance the predator/prey interactions within Fresno and allow natural reproduction of walleye to sustain the population. Walleye relative abundance averaged 16.9 WE/net from 2014-2020 and average walleye relative weight stabilized and started to increase (Appendix F and G). Walleye PSD has remained above 30 since 2016 and peaked at 61 in 2017 (Appendix H). Furthermore, walleye reproduction has been good to excellent since 2014 and Sub-Stock walleye (< 10") continued to recruit into the fishery (Appendix E and F).

Fisheries efforts have been devoted primarily to walleye management based on angler preference, biological capabilities of the reservoir and long-term sustainability of the Fresno fish community. The Fresno Advisory Committee prioritized walleye management (specifically high angler catch rates), what this species means to angler's fishing at Fresno, as well as its benefits to the local economy. The Advisory Committee recommended moderate to high annual walleye stocking rates, in combination with natural reproduction to increase angler catch rate for walleye.

1. Management objectives for walleye: Place the primary management emphasis on walleye. Utilize natural reproduction and hatchery stocked walleye fingerlings with the goal of producing an annual average of 18-21 walleye per net during fall gillnetting surveys.
 - a. Maintain average walleye relative weight greater than 85 during fall gillnetting surveys.
 - b. Maintain a walleye proportional size distribution (PSD) between 30-60 during fall gillnetting surveys.
2. Stock 50,000 marked walleye fingerlings (if available) starting in 2021 and increase to 75,000 marked walleye fingerlings (if available) in 2022. Stocking rates may be altered by biological and environmental conditions. Continue to evaluate walleye fingerling survival, recruitment and contributions to angler catch rates.

The following criteria will be used to guide walleye stocking rates

- a. Physical Condition of Existing Walleye Population.
 - i. Relative abundance should be a minimum 18 walleye/net.
 - i. If walleye relative abundance falls below 18 walleye per net, stocking rates will increase by 25,000 until walleye relative abundance obtains objective (18-21 walleye/net).
 - ii. If walleye relative abundance exceeds 21 walleye/net, stocking rates will decrease by 25,000 until walleye abundance obtain objective (18-21 walleye/net).

- ii. Average walleye relative weight should be a minimum of 85. Other population structure indices will also be considered, such as walleye growth and size structure (PSD).
 - i. If walleye relative weight falls below 85, stocking rates may decrease by 25,000 until walleye relative weight exceeds 85.
- 3. Walleye Limits: 5 daily and 10 in possession.
 - a. If walleye relative abundance exceeds 21 walleye/net **and** average walleye relative weight falls below 85 **and** walleye PSD falls below 30, FWP will propose increased walleye daily and possession limits until relative abundance obtain objective (18-21 walleye/net).
 - b. Angler harvest and compliance with regulations will be monitored through on-site creel surveys (conduct on odd numbered years if funding allows) and regular law enforcement checks.
- 4. Angler Catch Rate Target:
 - a. A defined angler catch rate target was not developed during this planning process. This is due to the high variability in angler skill and resultant catch rates and irregular creel surveys implemented by FWP on Fresno Reservoir. Angler creel data will be periodically collected throughout the Plan and used to guide planning decisions.

Northern Pike

Northern pike first appeared in Fresno Reservoir sometime during the 1940's and their abundance has fluctuated over the years. Extreme drought conditions from 2000 to 2002 reduced forage densities and spawning habitat which negatively impacted the spawning success and abundance of northern pike. However, the population rebounded in 2003 with increased water levels and inundated shoreline vegetation (Appendix J and K). Suitable pike habitat exists throughout the reservoir, with the most productive areas occurring in the transitional zone where the Milk River enters Fresno Reservoir. This area can be described as backwater habitats that consist of small side-channels and wetlands comprised of willow and cattails.

The adult pike population in Fresno is primarily comprised of quality (21-27.9") and preferred (28-33.9") sized fish (Appendix K). Memorable sized pike (> 34") are found in the reservoir but have historically been observed in low densities and frequency.

Northern pike offer additional angling opportunities throughout the year, especially during the winter months. The Advisory Committee emphasized the importance of northern pike as an additional angling opportunity and their value to the Fresno fishery.

Management objectives for northern pike:

1. Monitor population relative abundance and production through annual surveys. Maintain an annual running average of 2-4 northern pike per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Rely on natural reproduction and survival to determine population relative abundance.
3. Northern Pike Limits: 10 daily and in possession.

- a. If northern pike relative abundance exceeds 4 northern pike/net, FWP will consider increasing the daily limit for northern pike until northern pike relative abundance obtain objective (2-4 northern pike/net).

Yellow Perch

Yellow perch were introduced into Fresno Reservoir in 1968. The adult yellow perch population in Fresno has maintained low densities dating back to 1987. The long-term average relative abundance of yellow perch is 2.4/net with short-term increases in abundance occurring in 1987/1988, 2003/2004 and 2011/2012 (Appendix M). Increases observed in 03'-04' and 11'-12' were influenced by supplemental stocking of adult yellow perch and a historic water year (2010/2011). Successful spawning of yellow perch is relatively consistent among years, with several large year-classes being observed since 1990 (Appendix L). However, recruitment to the adult life stages (> 5 inches) is challenging and is influenced by predation, reservoir operations (water level fluctuations) and limited spawning and rearing habitat.

Habitat enhancement projects targeting yellow perch spawning and rearing habitat were conducted in the 1980's and again from 2017-present. These projects have utilized discarded Christmas trees to increase yellow perch spawning habitat. Several hundred trees have been donated and used to construct "spawning reefs" at locations in Kremlin and Kiehn's Bay, as well as bays near the dam. Habitat structures are placed in 6-15 feet of water. Visual surveys in the spring and summer have been conducted to verify use of the structures as both spawning and rearing habitat. Most of these structures have had at least one yellow perch egg skein present, suggesting yellow perch are utilizing these spawning structures when available and conditions are favorable. Furthermore, several species of juvenile fish have been observed using the structures as rearing habitat when they are inundated.

Supplemental stocking of pre-spawn adult yellow perch has occurred several times since 2000. From 2001-2004 adult yellow perch were trap and transferred by FWP from Lake Mary Ronan to supplement and increase the yellow perch population in Fresno Reservoir that was depleted due to severe water drawdowns (Gilge 2005). From 2011-2019 adult yellow perch were trap and transferred each spring from the Kremlin Water Ponds to increase the spawning stock and supplement the Fresno perch population (Nagel 2019). The Kremlin Water Ponds were drained in 2019 and other potential yellow perch donor sources are being explored as alternatives.

Yellow perch offer additional angling opportunities throughout the year. The Advisory Committee emphasized the importance of yellow perch as both a forage and gamefish species in Fresno and suggested the Plan incorporate management actions and tools that benefit and enhance the yellow perch population.

Management objectives for yellow perch:

1. Monitor population relative abundance and production through annual surveys. Maintain an annual running average of 2-4 yellow perch per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Rely primarily on natural reproduction and recruitment to determine population relative abundance.

3. Utilize discarded Christmas trees to increase yellow perch spawning and rearing habitat.
4. Continue and explore cost effective alternatives to enhance the yellow perch population.
 - a. Potential habitat enhancement projects that benefit yellow perch recruitment (in addition to Christmas tree project).
 - b. If available, transfer pre-spawn adult yellow perch in the spring to increase spawning stock. If forecasted water levels approach and exceed elevations favorable for yellow perch spawning.
 - i. Identify a disease-free source of adult yellow perch near Fresno Reservoir.
 - ii. Forecasted water elevations should exceed elevation 2567.0 in April.
 - c. Stock hatchery reared yellow perch if available.
5. Yellow perch limits: There is no daily or possession limits for yellow perch in the Eastern Fishing District.
 - a. Evaluate daily and possession limits for yellow perch on Fresno Reservoir.

Black Crappie

Black crappie were likely introduced into Fresno in the 1950's, however the first record of stocking by FWP occurred in 1991. Historically, the black crappie population could be described as a low density, high quality population in Fresno Reservoir. High numbers of black crappie are rarely observed during netting surveys, however the average length of adults observed often exceeds the memorable size class (> 12 inches; Appendix L and N).

Water conditions in Fresno have been excellent since 2008, especially during the months of May and June, when black crappie spawn. Elevated and stable water levels during this time has allowed the black crappie population to produce more consistent year-classes and recruitment to adults has increased (Appendix L and N). Receding water levels in late May and June impacts spawning success and significant spring/summer drawdowns to Fresno's pool elevations, which has occurred five times since 2000, impacts the entire population.

Black crappie offer additional angling opportunities throughout the year and are targeted by anglers as a trophy panfish opportunity in Fresno, though catch rates are low. The Advisory Committee emphasized the importance of black crappie as both a forage and gamefish species in Fresno and suggested the Plan incorporate management actions and tools that benefit and enhance the black crappie population.

Management objectives for black crappie:

1. Monitor population relative abundance and production through annual surveys. Maintain an annual running average of 1-2 black crappie per net during fall gillnetting series.
2. Rely primarily on natural reproduction and recruitment to determine population relative abundance.
3. Utilize discarded Christmas trees to increase crappie rearing habitat.
4. Continue and explore cost effective alternatives to enhance the black crappie population.

- a. Potential habitat enhancement projects that benefit black crappie spawning habitat and recruitment (in addition to Christmas tree project).
 - b. Stock hatchery reared black crappie if available.
 - c. Identify a disease-free source of adult black crappie near Fresno Reservoir.
5. Crappie limits: 15 daily and 30 in possession (Eastern District Standard).

Nearshore Forage

The nearshore forage fish community consists of approximately eight species that occupy the littoral areas of Fresno Reservoir. Typically, the most abundant species captured during annual seining surveys and found in the stomach contents of walleye and northern pike are young-of-year yellow perch, young-of-year black crappie, and spottail shiners. The littoral zone, and availability of associated habitats (rock, cobble, and vegetation) in Fresno is highly variable due to fluctuations in reservoir pool elevations.

Relative abundance of nearshore forage fishes generally follows changes in Fresno pool elevations (Appendix L). Elevated water levels inundate nearshore rock, cobble and terrestrial shoreline vegetation, creating suitable spawning habitat for a variety of fish species. However, decreasing water levels during critical spawning periods (late May and early June), significant drawdowns during the summer, and low pool elevations throughout the winter have been identified as critical factors influencing both spawning success and recruitment of all forage fish. For example, since 1990, four of the seven lowest nearshore forage relative abundance estimates observed occurred in years that Fresno Reservoir pool elevations were significantly reduced (2001/2002, 2017 and 2020; Appendix L).

The Advisory Committee emphasized the significant contribution nearshore forage fish have on the growth and condition of primary gamefish such as walleye and northern pike in Fresno Reservoir. Water level management and habitat enhancement were also strongly supported as important components that needed consideration in the Plan.

Management objectives for nearshore forage fish:

1. Continue to work with Reclamation on formalizing water level recommendations that benefit the fisheries resources in Fresno Reservoir.

The following water elevations and time periods are important for the fishery:

- a. Favorable spawning conditions for yellow perch occur when pool elevations are greater than 2565.0 during April and May. Maximum production occurs when reservoir levels are stable or increasing during these months.
- b. Black crappie and spottail shiners spawning conditions are maximized when pool elevations are greater than 2570.0 during May and June.
- c. Obtain overwinter pool elevations that submerge a high percentage of critical rock/cobble substrate for young of year fishes to seek refuge from predators.
- d. Pool elevations below 2555.0 have been shown to be extremely detrimental to the entire fish community in Fresno Reservoir.

2. Utilize discarded Christmas trees to increase nearshore spawning and rearing habitat. Explore additional habitat enhancement projects that benefit nearshore spawning and rearing habitats to increase forage production and diversity under variable water levels.
3. Maintain an annual running average of 100-200+ shoreline forage fish (combined young-of year yellow perch, young-of year black crappie, spottail and emerald shiner) per seine haul.
 - a. Monitoring of shoreline forage fish populations is done through standardized annual beach seining surveys conducted in late summer.
4. Investigate the potential for alternative forage fish introductions into Fresno Reservoir. The evaluation would determine potential alternative forage specie(s) and assess the positive and negative impacts associated with an introduction to the species assemblage currently found in Fresno Reservoir. This would be completed through writing an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement (in full compliance with Montana Environmental Policy Act requirements). New species evaluation would include consultation with Alberta Ministry of Environment and Parks.

Rainbow Trout

Fresno was managed as a trout fishery during the 1940's and early 1950's. Since that time rainbow trout have been periodically stocked to increase angler catch rates, diversify angling opportunities, and provide short-term angling opportunities when other species abundances were low (2002-2003). Success of these plants were poor, with minimal contribution to the angler catch and returns to netting surveys were low.

Management objectives for rainbow trout:

1. No rainbow trout stocking will occur during the duration of the Plan.

Milk River Above Fresno Dam

The Upper Milk River flows approximately 105 miles through Alberta before re-entering Montana in Hill County, approximately 34 miles upstream of the Fresno Reservoir headwaters. This section of the Milk River consists of badlands, native grasses, sagebrush, and shrub/forest landscapes located primarily on federal lands. Minimal angling pressure occurs in this section and the fish assemblage is comprised mostly of native species such as sauger, burbot, white sucker, longnose sucker, flathead chub, western silvery minnow and stonecat.

The primary habitat in this section is comprised mostly of fine sand and clay substrates. Ariel surveys (from Fresno Dam upstream to the eastern crossing) conducted in September 2020 identified limited rock, cobble and gravel substrates. Larger angular rock was primarily found where the river was eroding into steep embankments. Cobble and gravel substrates were associated with gullies and small tributaries entering the river. Some of the steeper embankments had larger angular rock outside of the normally wetted channel, but none within, suggesting that siltation has covered the majority of hard substrates. In other areas the larger rock appears to be lasting for a period of years, is somewhat rounded, and creating

scour. The rounded cobble and gravel originating in the gullies/tributaries is homogenous in size and may be more durable and washed often.

Management objectives for Milk River fish assemblage upstream of Fresno Reservoir:

1. Maintain a fish assemblage primarily comprised of native species.
2. Monitor relative abundance of these species through a variety of gear types.
3. Improve understanding of species assemblages and how they are influenced by Milk River flows and habitat.

Milk River Immediately Below Fresno Dam

The fish assemblage immediately below Fresno Dam is highly influenced by water operations and contribution's (entrainment) from the Fresno fish assemblage. Tailwaters FAS is located immediately below Fresno Dam and several public access opportunities are located within the 16 miles of Milk River located between Fresno Dam and the Havre Water Weir.

Two major tributaries (Big Sandy and Beaver Creek) also enter the Milk River in this area and provide increased species diversity, spawning and rearing habitat, and forage for both native and non-native fishes.

Anglers target a variety of species in this section with walleye, northern pike, lake whitefish, yellow perch, black crappie, white sucker and bullheads being the most common species caught.

Management objectives for Milk River fish assemblage immediately downstream of Fresno Reservoir from Fresno Dam to the Havre Water Weir:

1. Enhance angler catch rates and opportunity in this section of the Milk River.
 - a. Increases in walleye abundance in Fresno Reservoir will increase the number of walleye flushed/entrained below the dam and available to anglers fishing the river.
 - b. Explore additional access improvements and opportunities in this section of the Milk River.
2. Monitor relative abundance of the fish assemblage through a variety of gear types.
 - a. Monitor gamefish abundance as it relates to Fresno Reservoir population trends, specifically walleye and northern pike.
 - b. Evaluate potential impacts of increased predator densities on native fish species and assemblages located downstream of Fresno Dam.
3. Improve understanding of species assemblages and how they are influenced by Milk River flows and habitat.

VIII. OTHER MANAGEMENT COMPONENTS

Fishing Contests

Annual fishing contests on Fresno Reservoir have consisted of one open water and one ice fishing tournament, both of which have been live-release formats. Additionally, several youth-oriented contests

and fishing events are held to educate and recruit the next generation of anglers. These contests and events are held during both the open water and ice fishing seasons.

Statewide regulations for fishing contests do not outline specific guidelines for tournaments on specific waters. Each application is reviewed by fisheries personnel to determine if the tournament will have adverse impacts on the fisheries resource or create conflicts with other recreational users. On Fresno Reservoir, any fishing contest would also need to obtain a special use permit through Reclamation. Proposed tournaments are posted in major news outlets as per MEPA guidelines for a 30-day public review and comment period. If no controversial issues are identified and FWP determines that the proposed tournament will have no significant biological or social impacts, it's approved.

Tournament directors are informed about the threat of aquatic invasive species (AIS) and required to establish preventative protocols (clean, drain, and dry). All boats coming from out of state are required to be inspected for AIS prior to launch.

Management objectives for fishing contests:

1. There will be no limit on the number of tournaments that can be scheduled annually on Fresno Reservoir.
 - a. Contests may not be scheduled on holiday weekends, including but not limited to (Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day).
 - b. Encourage summer walleye tournaments to employ Catch, Photo, Release format. Any walleye catch and release tournaments with weigh-in type format will be limited to cool weather periods. May-June 15th, or after September 15th.
 - c. No tournaments will be permitted during the month of April to avoid impacts to walleye during the spawning period.
 - d. Tournaments may be canceled if summer reservoir water levels drop below elevation 2555.0.
 - e. As of the writing of the Plan, the Advisory Committee felt there wasn't a need to limit the number of tournaments. However, this will be reviewed annually to determine if there is a need to establish a limit.
2. Tournaments will be reviewed on an individual basis with regulatory authority Montana Code Annotated 87-3-121, MCA and ARM 12.7.8. 12.7.809. Evaluation of proposed tournaments will include potential biological and social aspects. Proposed tournaments will undergo a 30-day public review and comment period.
3. Tournament directors will be required to report post-tournament catch rate information in a standardized format.

Aquatic Invasive Species

Fresno Reservoir is a highly recognized fishery, with a majority of the annual angling pressure occurring during the open water period (April-October), when transmittal of aquatic invasive species is highest. Furthermore, some of these invasive species are no longer just a threat from outside sources and boaters. Eurasian water milfoil, New Zealand mud snails and Asian clams have established populations in

Montana. Introductions of invasive species and diseases all have the potential to adversely impact the existing native and sport fish community.

Management objectives for aquatic invasive species:

1. Inspect, clean and dry sampling gear to reduce the spread of AIS during FWP sampling surveys.
2. Work with FWP Aquatic Nuisance Species Coordinator to coordinate annual water/AIS testing in Fresno Reservoir and boat-check and boat washing stations during periods of high angler use.

Live Bait

The use of live bait fish (i.e. live minnows) is restricted at Fresno Reservoir. The regulation was established through an agreement with Alberta to reduce the likelihood of undesirable fish species such as common carp being introduced. Currently, Fresno Reservoir and the Milk River upstream through Alberta is the only section of the Milk River drainage without common carp present. The use of legal dead minnows, worms and leeches are allowed.

Management objectives for live bait:

1. Use of live bait fish will not be evaluated under the purview of the Plan.

Fishing and Recreational Access

Currently there are seven public access sites (four boat ramps) located around the reservoir and immediately below Fresno Dam. These recreation sites are managed by governmental natural resource agencies and/or the Fresno Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited (FCWU). The following inventory lists the site name along with the entity responsible for the day-to-day recreational management of the site:

Kremlin Bay Recreation Site.....	Reclamation
Overlook and Boat Ramp Day Use Area.....	Reclamation
Fresno Beach Day Use Area.....	Reclamation
Jaycees Beach.....	Reclamation
Kiehn’s Bay.....	Reclamation
Fresno Tailwaters FAS.....	FWP
Walleyes Campground and Pavilion.....	FCWU

All of the camping opportunities around Fresno Reservoir are primitive. Boat ramp maintenance and improvements periodically occur, with a majority of these maintenance and improvement efforts being made by FCWU and Reclamation. There’s no recreational designation currently established at Fresno

Reservoir and this often limits Reclamation's ability to allocate substantial funding to increase and improve recreational sites and access opportunities.

Access and site improvements currently being pursued include bank stabilization at Fresno Tailwaters FAS (FWP/Reclamation) as well as access improvements at the Overlook boat ramp upper and lower parking lots (FCWU/FWP/Reclamation).

Management objectives for fishing and recreational access:

1. Work with Reclamation, angling groups, local business and other civic organizations to explore potential construction and maintenance of a fish cleaning station at Fresno Reservoir.
2. Continue to encourage and cooperate with Reclamation, FCWU, and other partners in the development of recreational access areas. Although FWP doesn't own or control any recreational facilities on the lands surrounding Fresno Reservoir they would participate in a supporting role.
3. Once Reclamation recreation staff are hired, work cooperatively with Reclamation on developing a Recreation Plan at Fresno Reservoir.

Water Operations and Management

The water supply for the Milk River Project and Fresno Reservoir is managed by the Bureau of Reclamation and Milk River Joint Board of Control. The water supply is supplemented by water from the St. Mary River watershed. A portion of the St. Mary River watershed water is stored in Lake Sherburne, located in Glacier National Park. Water released from Lake Sherburne into the St. Mary River is diverted into the 29-mile long St. Mary Canal and discharged into the North Fork of the Milk River. The Milk River flows into Canada and travels more than 200-miles through Alberta before re-entering the United States. After re-entering the United States, the water flows into Fresno Reservoir where it is stored until needed for irrigation (Simonds 1998). Water from the Project is used to irrigate more than 120,000 acres located below Fresno Dam, as well as providing municipal water and flood control to several communities located downstream (Simonds 1998). The diversion ensures the Milk River and downstream water users have a more reliable source of water and flow. Prior to the diversion, the Milk River would become intermittent pools and dry out in 6 of 10 years. The infrastructure is well over 100 years old and the reliability of the system has diminished. Furthermore, overall storage capacity in Fresno Reservoir has decreased due to sedimentation. The Project is vulnerable to short and long-term drought conditions.

The fishery in Fresno Reservoir has varied over time due to high fluctuations in reservoir water elevations. On average, water levels in Fresno fluctuate 10-20+ feet per year with an annual water retention rate of 117 (± 40) days (storage capacity (acre-feet)/average annual inflows (acre-feet)). The timing of this fluctuation greatly influences the reproductive success, vulnerability to predation, and overall survival of forage and sport fish. Low water retention rates increase the rate in which nutrients are flushed, hindering the overall productivity to the fish community in Fresno Reservoir. The fluctuating water levels help keep littoral rock and gravel (walleye spawning substrates) clean, which benefits natural reproduction. However, the fluctuating water levels restrict the growth of aquatic vegetation and reduces the inundation time when establishment occurs. This is important rearing habitat for young game and forage fishes, when available.

The fishery was severely impacted in 2001 and 2002 when drought conditions reduced Fresno Reservoir to 8% and 4% of storage capacity, respectively. Forage densities were drastically reduced and the abundance and condition (Wr) of key sport fishes was at an all-time low. In 2017, a flash drought occurred along the Hi-Line throughout the summer. The demands for water were high and Fresno Reservoir was drawn down approximately 33 feet (13% of storage capacity) by August 11. At that time irrigation operations were ceased, and Fresno was re-filled approximately 15-feet (45% storage capacity) to fulfill over-winter minimum flow requirements and municipal use designations. Based on the statewide creel survey conducted by FWP in 2017/2018, Fresno received an estimated 4,370 +/- 1,979 angler days (FWP Fisheries Bureau 2018). This was lowest observed fishing pressure since 2001/2002, the last time Fresno pool elevations were drastically reduced.

A catastrophic failure at Drop 5 (Project infrastructure) crippled the water delivery system in 2020 and Fresno water levels were impacted. From May 23rd - October 20th Fresno Reservoir elevations dropped 28 feet (16% of storage capacity). Repairs to the drop structures were finished in mid-October and Reclamation was able to transfer some water from Lake Sherburne prior to winter, raising Fresno Reservoir elevations seven feet (29% of storage capacity). It's unclear on the long-term impacts to the fish community when water levels are quickly reduced and replenished within one water-year. Data collected suggests the greatest impacts to the Fresno Reservoir fish community occurs when water levels are reduced for a prolonged period (> one spawning cycle) and remain low throughout an entire water year or more.

The reduced water levels observed in 2017 and 2020 occurred after the spring spawning period (after May 31st) of walleye, yellow perch and northern pike, when water conditions were still very good. In both years walleye reproductive success was good, yet the reproductive success and recruitment of other species such as yellow perch and black crappie was low. Under rapid drawdown scenarios our data suggests limited spawning conditions may exist, vulnerability to predation may increase, entrainment rates may increase, or a combination of these occur. Creating potential short and long-term impacts to these species and the forage base.

Management actions for water operations and management:

1. Work cooperatively with Reclamation, Department of Natural Resource and Conservation (DNRC), irrigators, and other water users to incorporate fisheries management and angler access concerns into water operation strategies.
 - a. Explore options to place Fish and Wildlife designation on water allocated for the Milk River Project.
2. Continue to work with the Reclamation on formalizing water level recommendations that benefit the fisheries resources in Fresno Reservoir. Recommendations would highlight the following water elevations and time periods:
 - a. Favorable spawning conditions for yellow perch occur when pool elevations are greater than 2565.0 during April and May. Maximum production occurs when reservoir levels are stable or increasing during these months.
 - b. Black crappie and spottail shiners spawning conditions are maximized when pool elevations are greater than 2570.0 during May and June.

- c. Obtain overwinter pool elevations that submerge a high percentage of critical rock/cobble substrate for young of year fishes to seek refuge from predators.
 - d. Pool elevations below 2555.0 have been shown to be extremely detrimental to the entire fish community in Fresno Reservoir.
3. Pursue funding to evaluate availability of critical habitats and responses of fish population during variable water conditions. The evaluation would aid in the establishment of water operations criteria that enhances the overall management of the Fresno Reservoir fishery.

Habitat Availability and Enhancement

Fresno Reservoir is comprised of a variety of aquatic habitats throughout the system. The dam is comprised of large angular rock with the majority of the middle section of the reservoir comprised of rock/cobble and sandy shorelines and points. The larger bays consist of rocky points with sand, mud and clay substrates, with the potential to establish good aquatic vegetation when water levels are high and stable. The upper portion of the reservoir, where it narrows, is comprised primarily of large rock/boulder points, bluffs, and shorelines, but transitions quickly to mud/muck. Aquatic vegetation establishes in this section as well when water levels are high and stable. The headwaters are comprised of a series of small to large wetlands comprised of cattails, rushes, willows and aquatic vegetation, which connect to the Milk River and Fresno Reservoir through small channels and becomes isolated when water levels are reduced.

The availability of aquatic habitat in Fresno Reservoir is highly variable, both seasonally and annually. Highly fluctuating water levels keep littoral rock and cobble clean but often hinders the establishment of aquatic vegetation and the duration its inundated. At full pool, the majority of aquatic habitat in Fresno Reservoir occurs in depths less than 15 feet with little to no structure in depths greater than 25-30 feet.

Reclamation has conducted periodic studies looking at Fresno Reservoir's overall storage capacity and surface area, and how sedimentation has altered these over the last 80 years (Appendix P). The most recent survey suggests Fresno Reservoir has lost approximately 30,000 acre-feet of storage and 800 surface acres (Appendix P; Ferrari 2013). When Fresno Reservoir's pool elevation drops 15 feet, it equates to a loss of approximately 57,000 acre-feet of storage (62%) and 2,800 surface acres (55%) (Appendix P; Ferrari 2013).

Fresno has established trees and willows near the shoreline throughout the reservoir, where conditions are favorable for their establishment. These habitats are inundated on most years in the spring but for a short period of time.

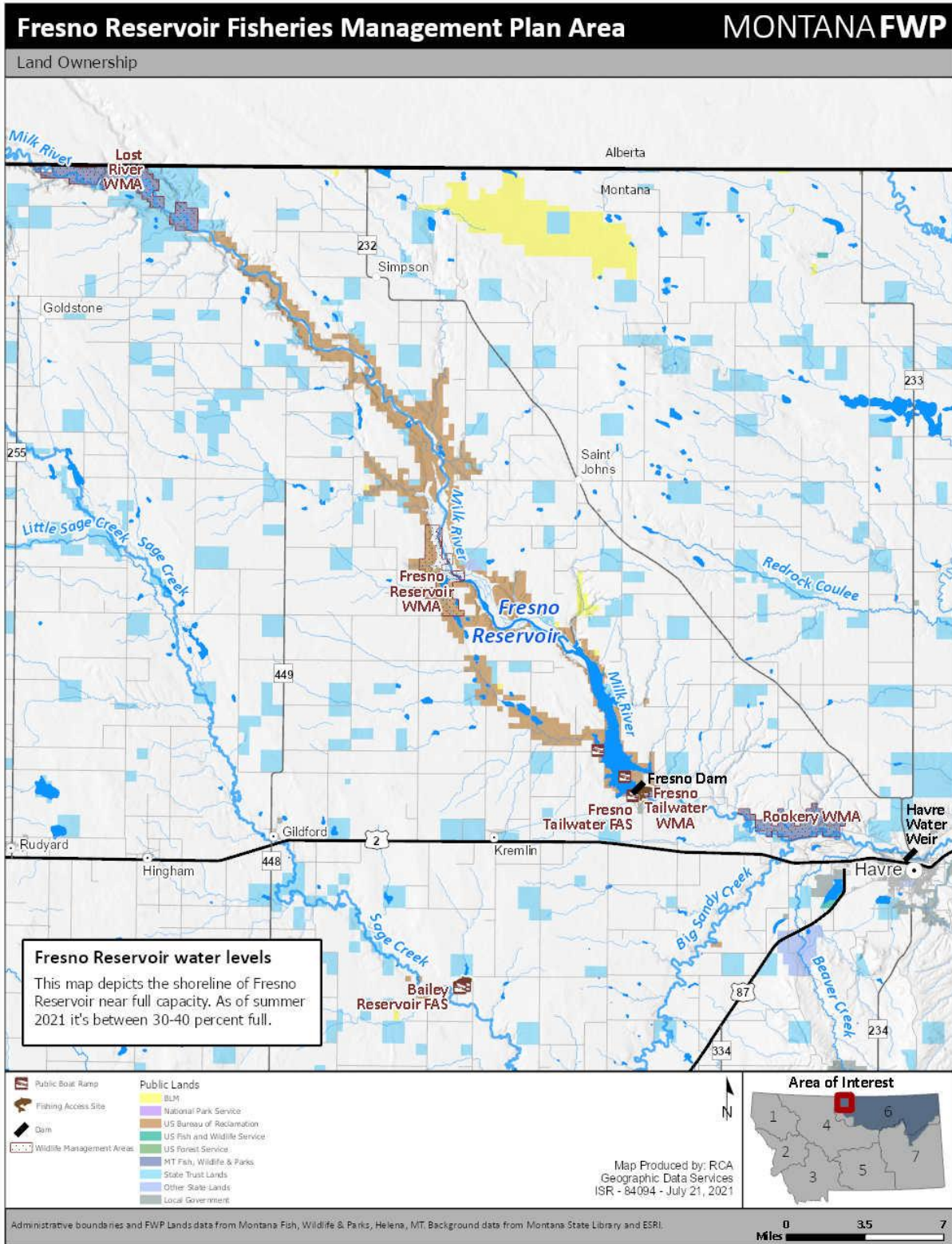
During the 1980's discarded Christmas trees were bundled and sunk to promote and increase yellow perch reproduction. This project was initiated again in 2017 and has continued through 2021. Over the last five years FWP and the Fresno Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited have collected, bundled and placed several hundred trees in the littoral zone (6-15-foot depths) at numerous locations. The primary objective is to increase yellow perch reproductive success and to provide rearing habitat during the summer and fall for all juvenile sport and forage fishes when these structures are inundated.

Management actions for habitat enhancement:

1. Work collaboratively with Reclamation on reservoir water levels that promote and enhance the availability of diverse aquatic habitats in Fresno Reservoir.
2. Continue utilizing discarded Christmas trees annually to increase nearshore spawning and rearing habitat.
3. Explore additional habitat enhancement projects that benefit nearshore spawning and rearing habitats to increase forage production and diversity under variable water levels.
4. Explore additional habitat enhancement projects targeting deep-water basin areas that provide additional rearing habitat for juvenile fishes during periods of low water levels.
5. Explore options for protecting and enhancing terrestrial vegetation along shorelines during periods of low water levels.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Fresno Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan area.



Appendix B. List of Advisory Committee members and interest group(s) represented during the development of the Fresno Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan.

Participant	Represented Interest Group(s)
Scott Adams	Local Walleye Angler
Brian Albrecht	Local Walleye Angler / General Angler (Kids Fishing) / Local Business
Jeff Dibblee	Local Walleye Angler / General Angler (Kids Fishing)
Dale Gilbert	Out of Area Walleye Angler / General Angler (Kids Fishing)
Don Groven	Local Walleye Angler
Chris Johnsrud	General Angler (Kids Fishing)
Nate Molstad	Local Walleye Angler / General Angler (Kids Fishing)
Todd O'Leary	Local Business
Mark Peterson	General Angler (kids) / Local Government

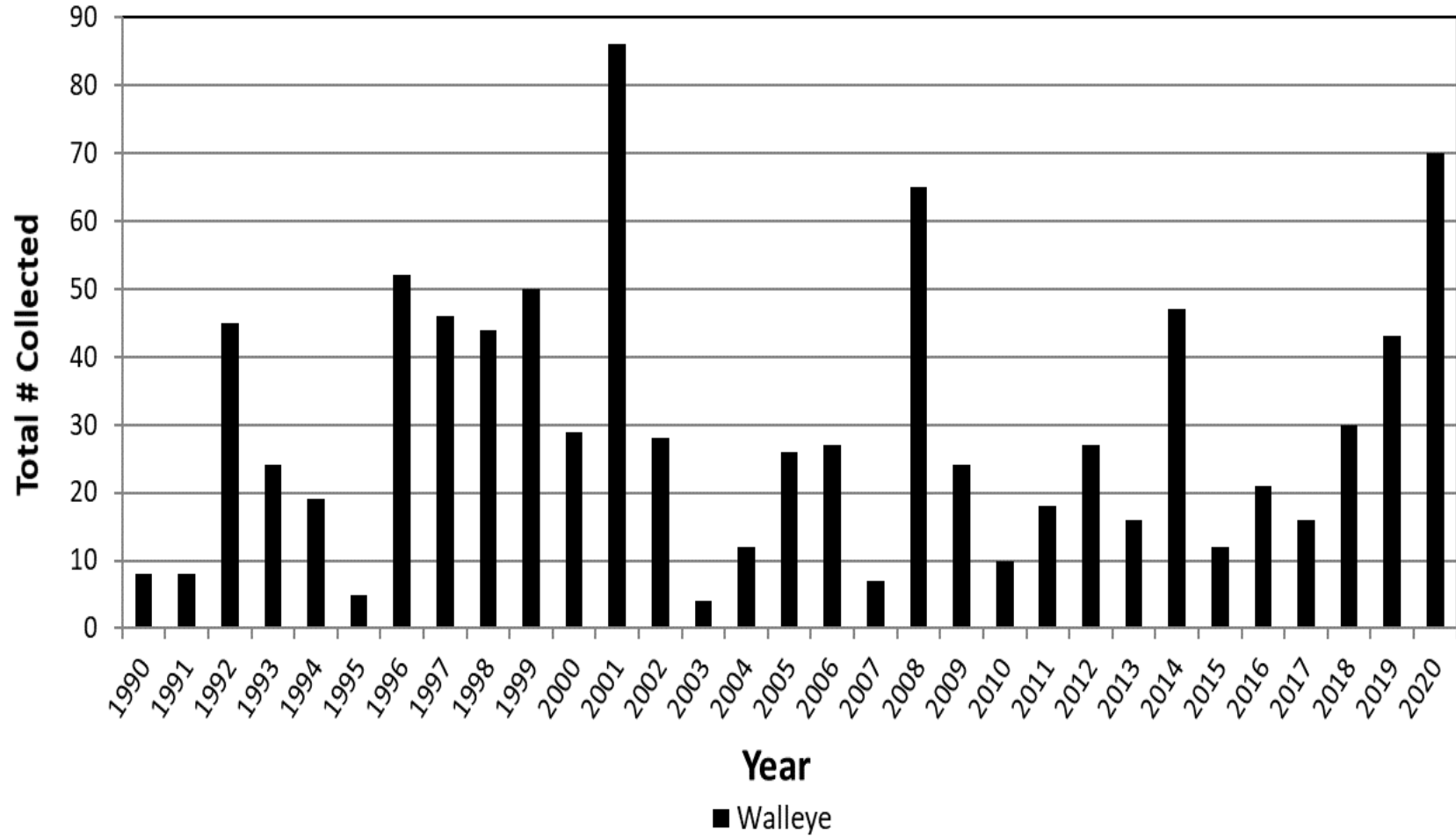
Appendix C. List of introduced and native fish species found in Fresno Reservoir.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Native (N) or Introduced (I)	Year of Introduction
Black crappie	<i>Pomoxis nigromaculatus</i>	I	1940's
Brook stickleback	<i>Culaea inconstans</i>	N	NA
Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>	I	1949
Burbot	<i>Lota lota</i>	N	NA
Emerald shiner	<i>Notropis atherionoides</i>	N	NA
Fathead minnow	<i>Pimephales promelas</i>	N	NA
Flathead chub	<i>Hybopsis gracilis</i>	N	NA
Kokanee Salmon	<i>Oncorhynchus nerka</i>	I	1944
Lake chub	<i>Couesius plumbeus</i>	N	NA
Lake whitefish	<i>Coregonus clupeaformis</i>	I	Unknown
Largemouth Bass	<i>Micropterus salmoides</i>	I	1940
Longnose sucker	<i>Catostomus catostomas</i>	N	NA
Northern pike	<i>Esox lucious</i>	I	1940's
Rainbow trout	<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>	I	1941
Sauger	<i>Sander canadense</i>	N	NA
Silvery Minnow	<i>Hybognathus argyritis</i>	N	NA
Smallmouth bass	<i>Micropterus dolemieu</i>	I	1976
Spottail shiner	<i>Notropis hudsonius</i>	I	1968
Stonecat	<i>Noturus flavus</i>	N	NA
Walleye	<i>Sander vitreum</i>	I	1957
White sucker	<i>Catostomus commersoni</i>	N	NA
Yellow perch	<i>Perca flavescens</i>	I	1968

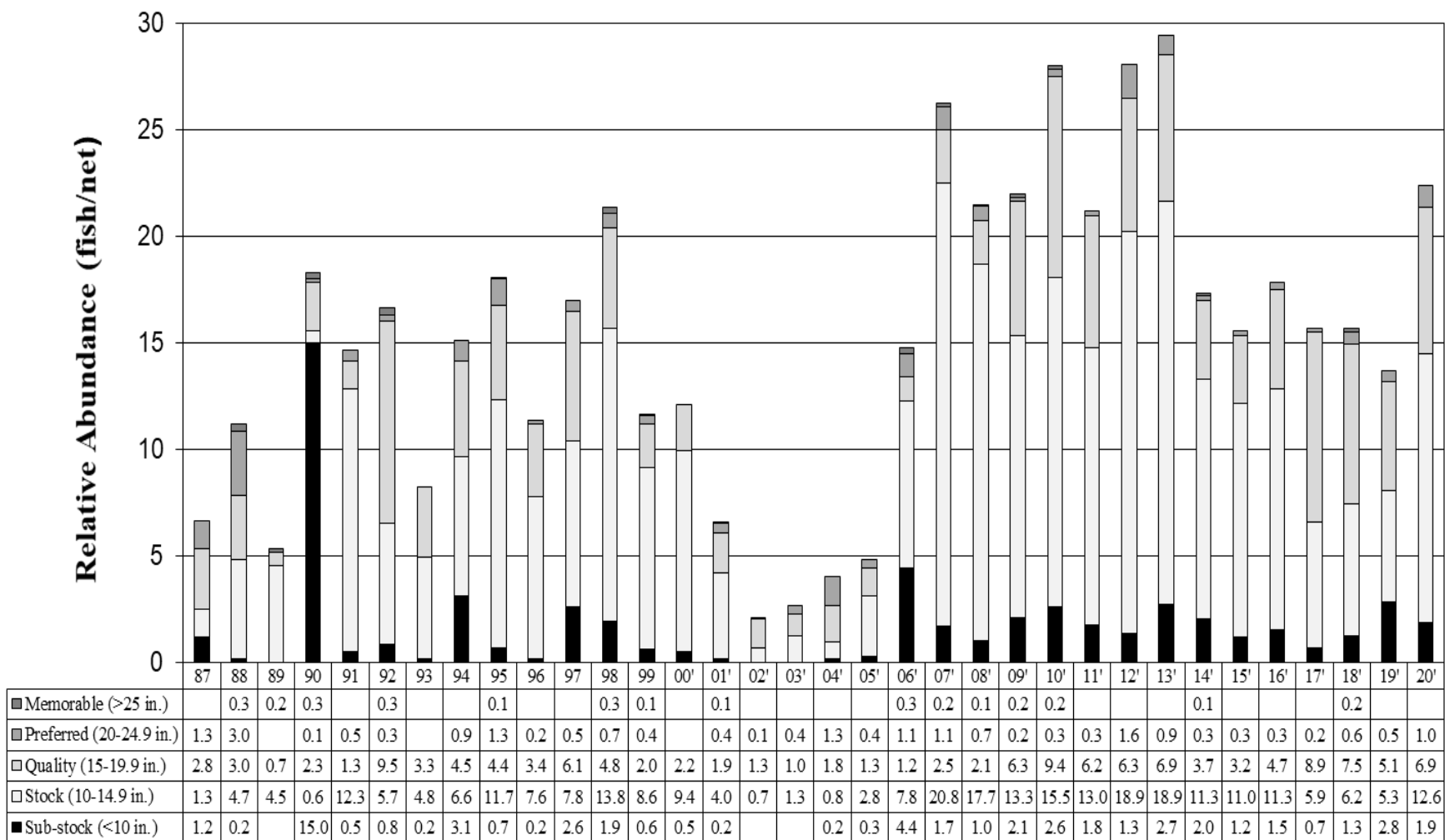
Appendix D. Summary of walleye relative abundance, average length, relative weight, and stocking in Fresno Reservoir, 1996-2020.

	Relative Abundance (#/net)	Average Length (inch)	Relative Weight (Wr)	Walleye Fry Stocked	Walleye Fingerlings Stocked
1996	11.3	13.7	95.6	100000	0
1997	17	13.6	90.4	0	10000
1998	21.3	13.8	89.3	0	100000
1999	12	13.6	83.5	0	0
2000	12.2	13.5	81.2	0	0
2001	6.6	14.8	71	0	0
2002	2.1	15.5	85.9	0	0
2003	2.7	15.9	101.6	0	100000
2004	4	17.1	86.5	0	100000
2005	4.8	13.9	99.9	0	100000
2006	14.8	12.5	103.2	0	199568
2007	26.3	13	88.5	0	99702
2008	21.5	13.4	88.1	0	100267
2009	22	13.8	96.6	0	90999
2010	28	13.9	97.7	0	101151
2011	21.2	13	95.2	0	38584
2012	28.1	14.2	88.8	0	0
2013	29.5	13.5	88	0	0
2014	17.3	13.2	83.7	0	0
2015	15.6	13.5	82.2	0	0
2016	17.8	13.8	82.8	0	0
2017	15.7	15.1	81.9	0	0
2018	15.7	14.5	88.6	0	0
2019	13.7	13.7	83.3	0	0
2020	22.4	14.4	87.2	0	0

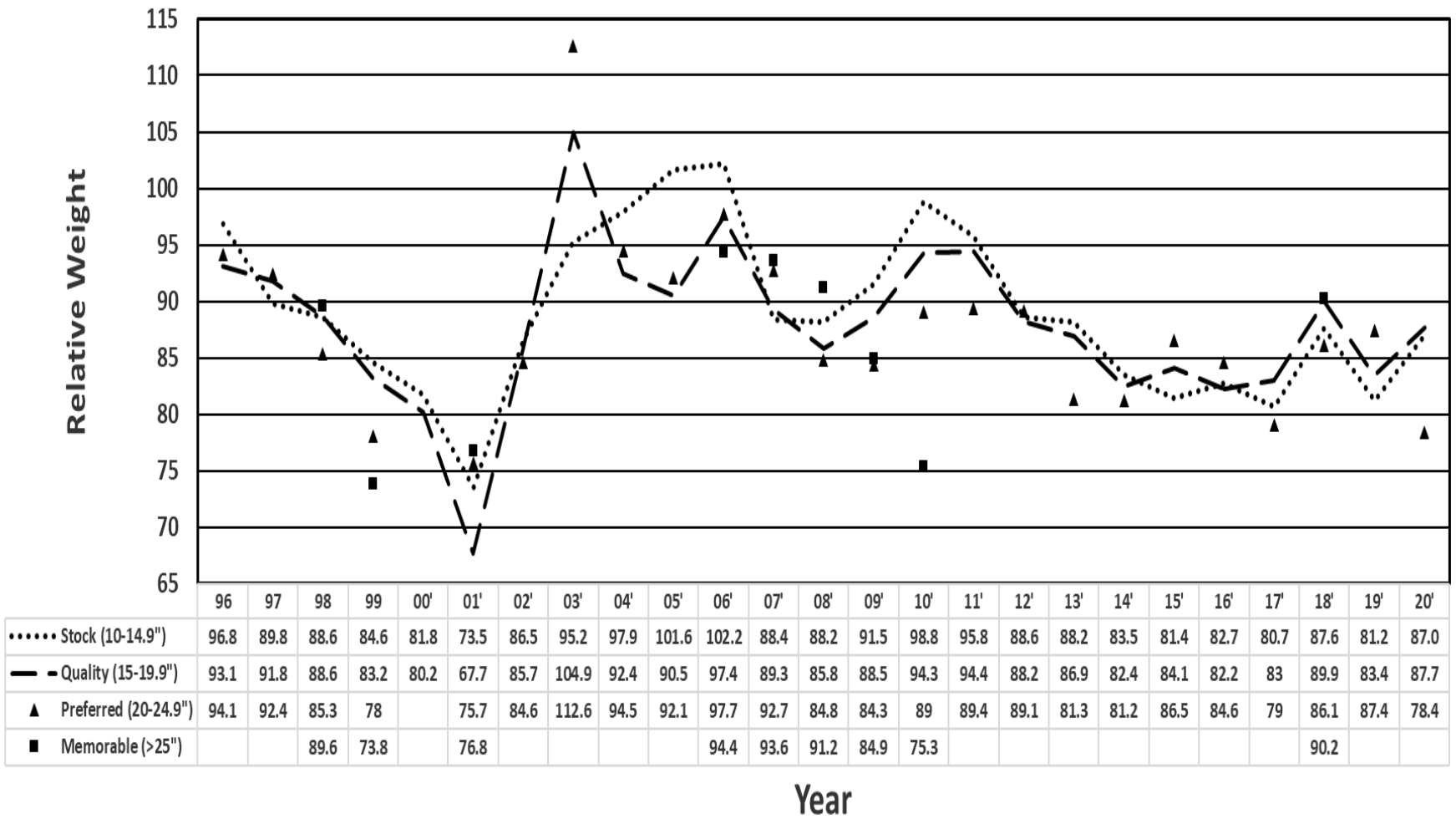
Appendix E. Total observed young-of-year walleye collected during annual seine hauls in Fresno Reservoir, August, 1990-2020.



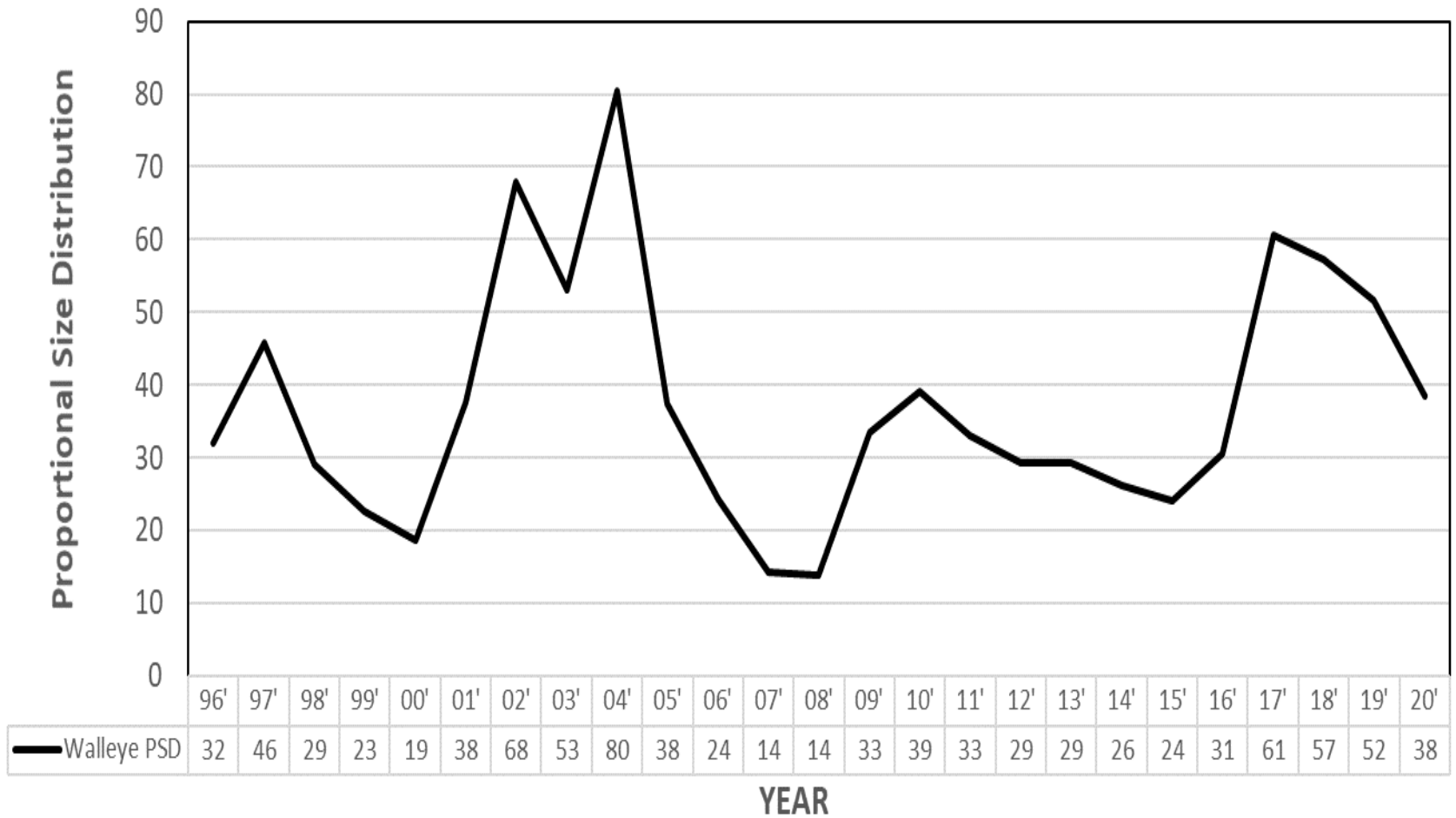
Appendix F. Length structure, in terms of relative abundance, of walleye collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during September, 1987-2020.



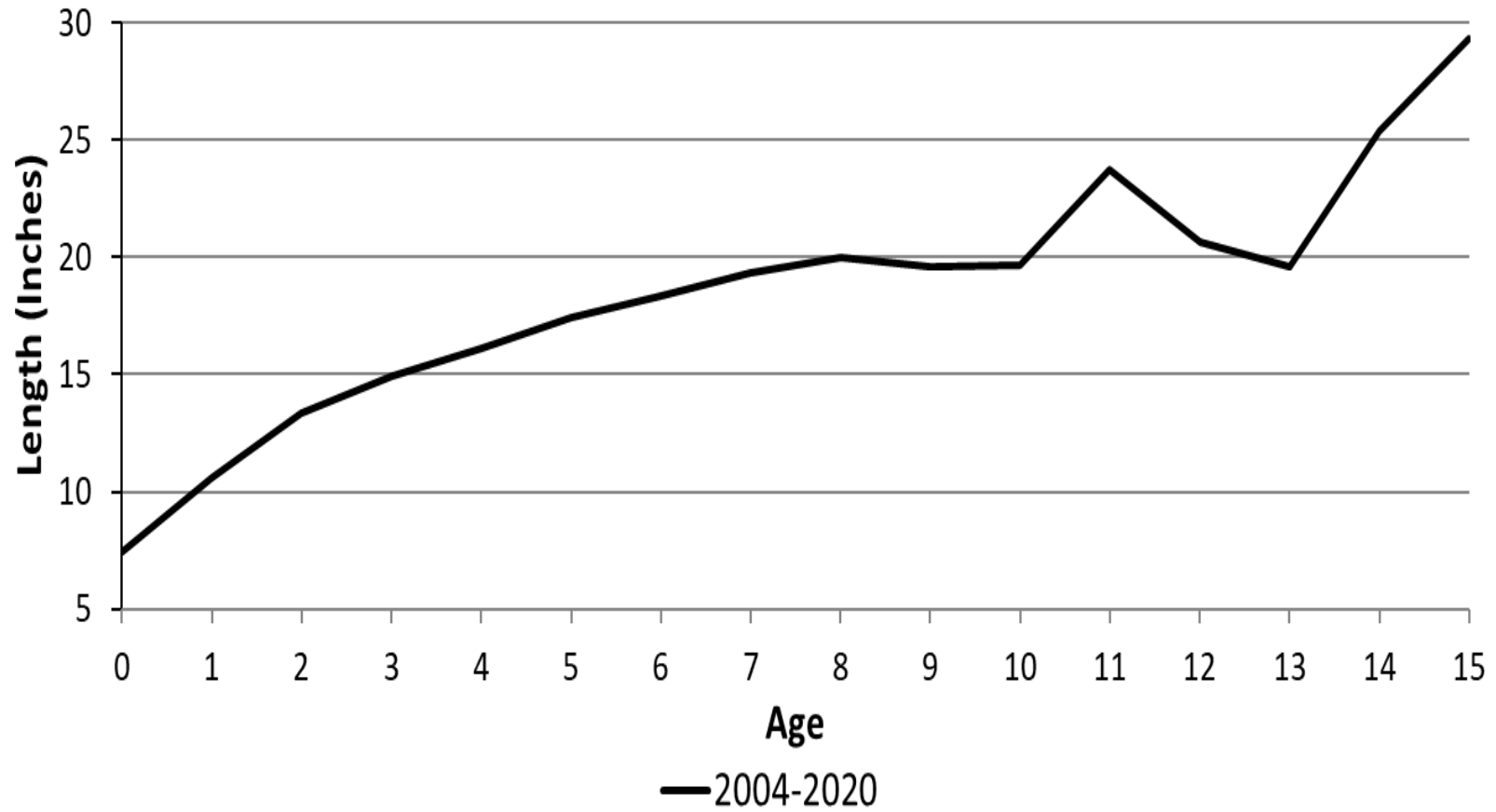
Appendix G. Relative weights of various size categories of walleye collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 1996-2020.



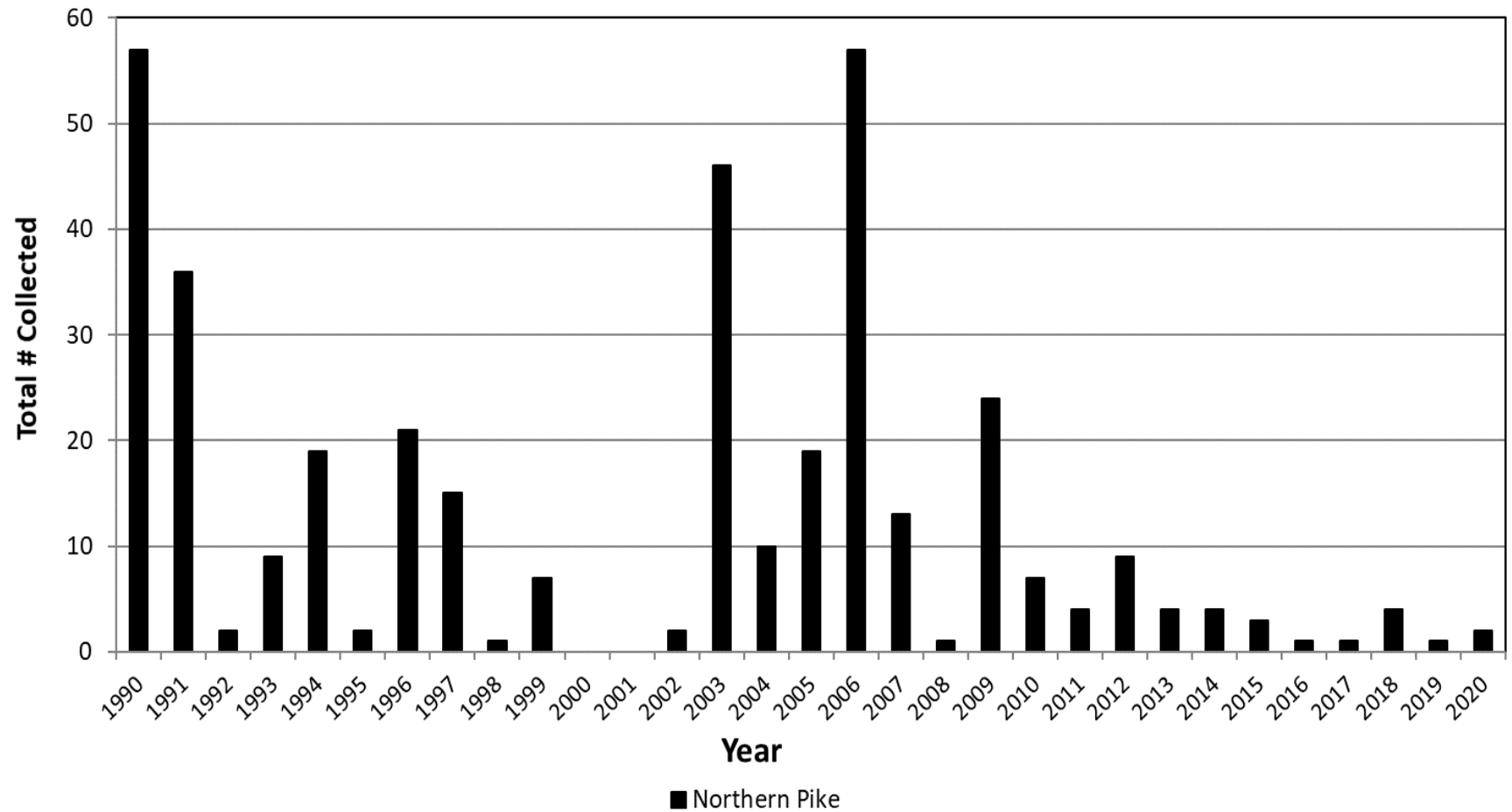
Appendix H. Proportional size distribution (PSD) for walleye collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 2004-2020.



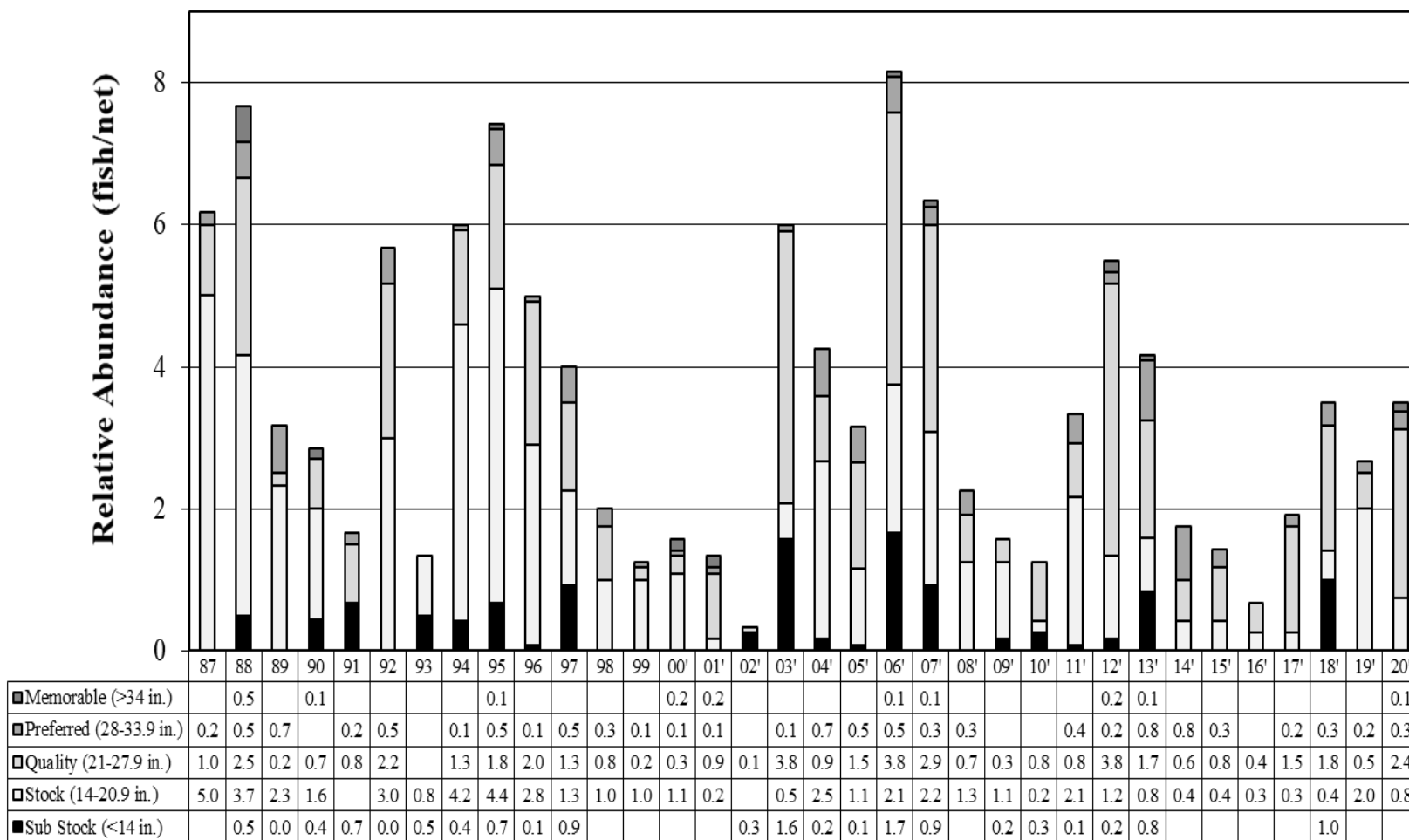
Appendix I. Mean length-at-age at time of capture (in) for walleye collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 2004-2020. Walleye collected were aged from sectioned otoliths.



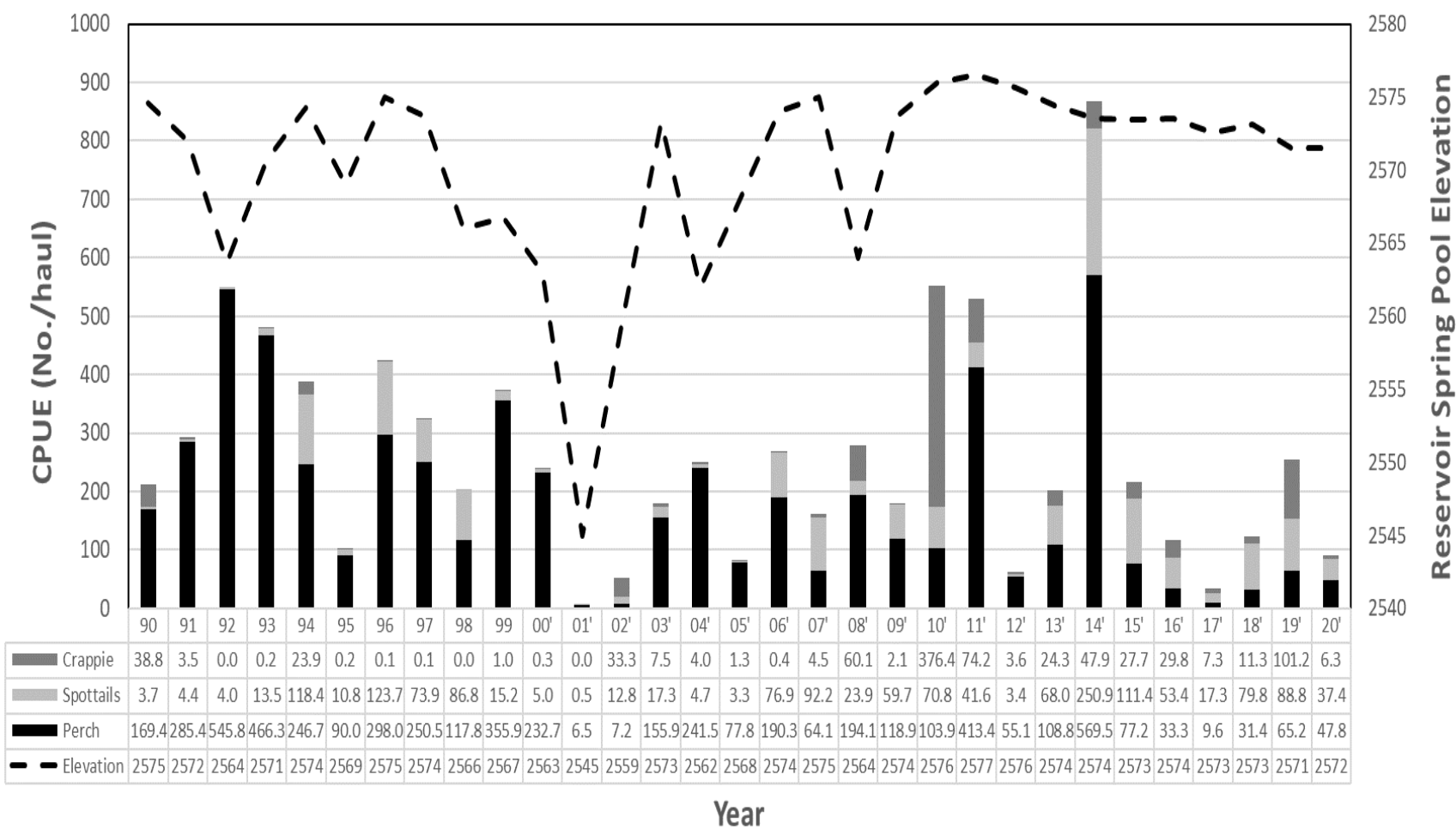
Appendix J. Total observed young-of-year northern pike collected during annual seine hauls in Fresno Reservoir, August, 1990-2020.



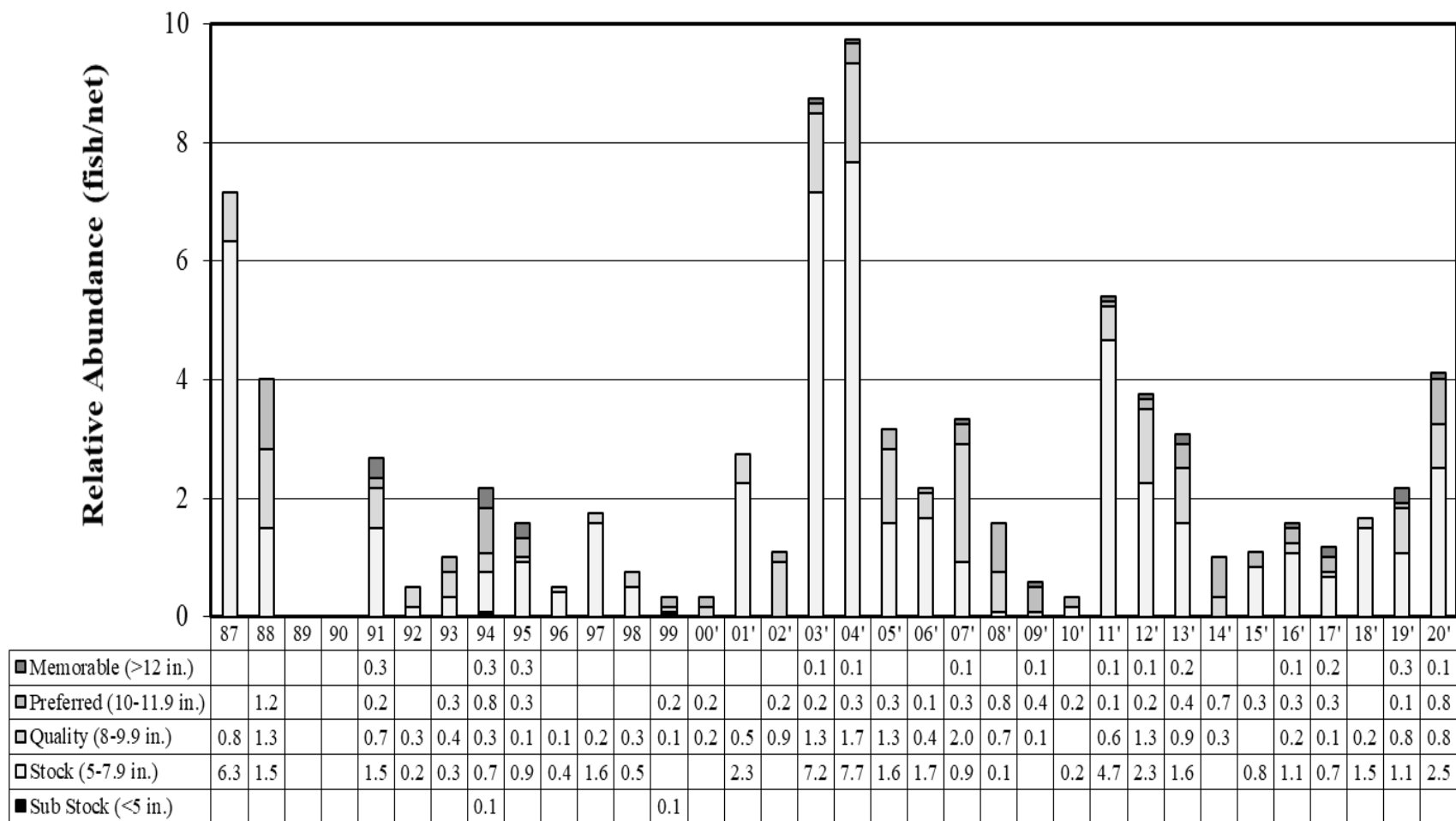
Appendix K. Size structure, in terms of relative abundance, of northern pike collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 1987-2020.



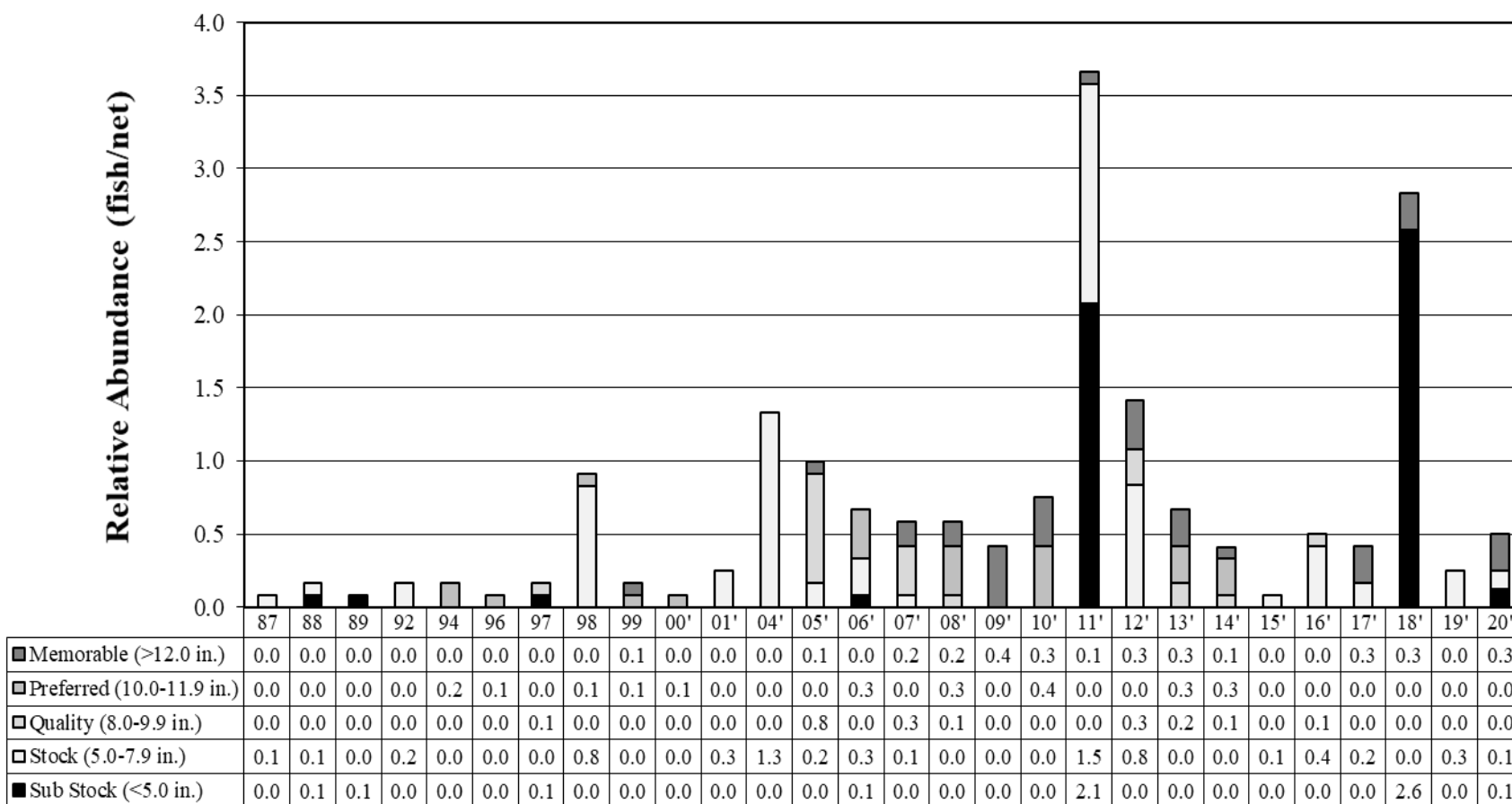
Appendix L. Average annual Spring pool elevation (April-June) compared to mean catch per unit effort (CPUE) of young-of-year yellow perch, young-of-year black crappie, and spottail shiner collected during annual seine hauls in Fresno Reservoir, 1990-2020.



Appendix M. Size structure, in terms of relative abundance, of yellow perch collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 1987-2020.



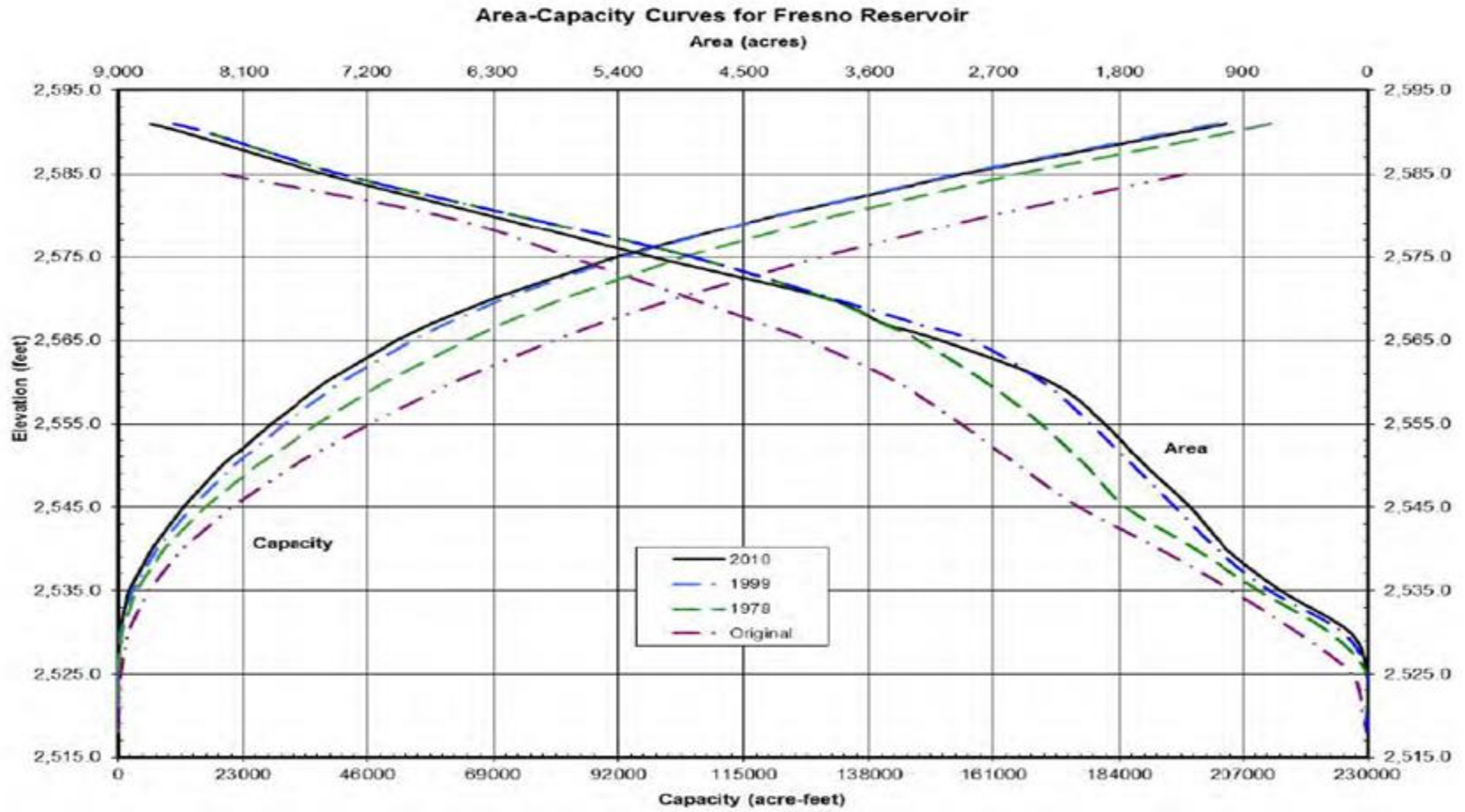
Appendix N. Size structure, in terms of relative abundance, of black crappie collected in standardized experimental gill net series in Fresno Reservoir during, September, 1987-2020.



Appendix O. Methods of sampling, sampling periods and measures of sampling on Fresno Reservoir.

Sampling Strata	Sampling Time	Sampling Gear	Standardized	Target Species	Measure(s) of
Seining	August	100'x10' beach seine (1/8" mesh)	Yes	All species with emphasis on shoreline forage species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relative abundance ▪ Species composition and distribution
Gillnetting	Septemeber	125' experimental nets (3/4" -1" -1 1/4" -1 1/2" - 2" mesh panels)	Yes	All species with emphasis on walleye	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relative abundance ▪ Relative weights ▪ Proportional Size Distribution (PSD) ▪ Age and growth analysis ▪ Diet ▪ Species composition and distribution

Appendix P. Area-capacity curves detailing Fresno Reservoir area (surface acres) and capacity (acre-feet) under different pool elevations (1939-2010). The curves were developed by Reclamation during a 2010 sedimentation survey (Ferrari 2013).



Appendix Q. Overview of public solicitation and involvement during the development of the Fresno Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan. Order of events are listed in chronological order.

Date	Info	Solicitation Means	Location
2/3/2021	Advisory Committee - Call for interested applicants	Radio / social media / newspaper / FWP website	Statewide
3/18/2021	Advisory Committee Meeting #1	Email	Virtual
4/1/2021	Advisory Committee Meeting #2	Email	In-person (Havre)
4/22/2021	Advisory Committee Meeting #3	Email	In-person (Havre)
5/27/2021	Advisory Committee Meeting #4	Email	In-person (Havre)
6/29/2021-7/23/2021	Advisory Committee and Technical Advisor review and comment of draft Plan	Email	Remote
8/1/2021-8/31/2021	Public comment period on Draft Management Plan	Radio / Social Media / Newspaper / FWP Website/In-person (Havre)	Statewide
8/31/2021	Draft Plan presentation to Region 6 Citizen Advisory Committee	In-person	Fort Peck
9/9/2021	Draft Plan placed on FWP Commission Agenda for October meeting	Email	Helena
10/28/2021	Draft Plan presented to FWP Commission for Final Approval	In-person	Helena
01/01/2022	Fresno Reservoir Fisheries Management Plan goes into effect (2022-2031)	N/A	N/A

Appendix R. Source of comments received, comments made and FWP response during open public comment period, August 1-31, 2021.

Source of Comment (email, open house, FWP office, letter, verbal)	Comment	FWP Response
Email	The Fresno Reservoir fisheries will be managed as a walleye fishery with the primary goal of high angler catch rates for Stock and Quality walleye. This will be accomplished by stocking hatchery walleye to augment the wild walleye population. An emphasis will be placed on habitat enhancement efforts to support other species of interest (yellow perch, black crappie and forage species). I strongly support this plan for Fresno.	<i>This goal statement was developed to encompass the overall objective of the Fresno Management Plan and ultimately increase angler catch rates for walleye.</i>
Email	I fully support this increase in Walleye stocking numbers in Fresno Res. It will not only help MT anglers but provide an increase in the local economy due to an increase of anglers in the local waters.	<i>FWP recognizes the economic importance of the Fresno fishery to the local economy. Walleye are the primary gamefish targeted by anglers and FWP data suggests walleye population dynamics and water levels directly influence angling and recreational use at Fresno Reservoir.</i>
Open House	Would like to see access improvement to the Rookery WMA area below Fresno Dam. There are currently 4 access roads close to the Milk River. I would like to see these roads improved to access the river for fishing, hunting and boat recreation. Also, I believe we can enhance the fishing in the river by improving the pool habitat to accommodate sport fishing and should be designed to slow or stop silt from filling them in.	<i>The Rookery WMA currently allows walk-in access from designated parking areas to approximately 5 river miles along the Milk River. There's also a takeout area located within the Rookery offering floaters 14 river miles of access downstream of Fresno Dam/Tailwaters FAS. FWP will continue to explore and identify opportunities to increase fish habitat that benefits multiple species, along the Milk River and at Fresno Reservoir.</i>

<p>Open House</p>	<p>Would like to see access improvement to the Rookery WMA area below Fresno Dam.</p>	<p><i>The Rookery WMA currently allows walk-in access from designated parking areas to approximately 5 river miles along the Milk River. There's also a takeout area located within the Rookery offering floaters 14 river miles of access downstream of Fresno Dam/Tailwaters FAS.</i></p> <p><i>FWP will continue to explore and identify opportunities to increase fish habitat that benefits multiple species, along the Milk River and at Fresno Reservoir.</i></p>
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