

Indiana Department of Natural Resources News Item **May 31, 2007**

Viral hemorrhagic septicemia, or VHS, is a viral fish disease responsible for large scale mortalities of various fish species within the Great Lakes. It continues to spread throughout the Great Lakes Basin. To date, VHS has been implicated as a mortality factor in large fish kills in freshwater drum (lakes Ontario and Erie), Great Lakes muskies (Lake St. Clair), round gobies (Lake Ontario), gizzard shad (St. Clair River), white bass (Lake Erie) and yellow perch (lakes Erie and Lake St. Clair). VHS has also been confirmed in smaller mortality events in lake whitefish (Lake Huron), walleye (Lake Huron), smallmouth bass (Lake St. Clair), black crappie (Lake St. Clair), and bluegill (Lake St. Clair).

Within the last month, the VHS virus (VHSV) has been found within the Lake Michigan watershed. A kill of several hundred drum occurred in the Lake Winnebago system upstream of Wisconsin's Green Bay. A brown trout found dead on the shore near Algoma, Wisconsin tested positive for VHS. Smallmouth bass collected from Wisconsin's Sturgeon Bay, as part of surveillance efforts looking for VHSV, were positive for the virus. VHS was responsible for the deaths of black crappie, bluegill and musky in Budd Lake located in Michigan's Clare County.

VHSV had been a pathogen affecting only trout and salmon. It is suspected the virus entered the Great Lakes via ballast water, adapted to fresh water and became virulent to other fish species. Without help, the virus would likely spread throughout the Great Lakes Basin, but at a slow pace. Fish kills will result in areas where it moves to, but eventually, survivors will produce resistant offspring and mortality events would diminish.

However, the virus is robust and can survive in water for a week and in carcasses for a month. Without efforts to educate anglers and recreational watercraft users on how they can prevent its spread, VHSV will spread quickly throughout the Basin and into adjacent watersheds. Resultant fish kills could be massive from high viral loadings and affected fish populations could take years to build resistance and recover.

VHS does not pose a threat to human, pet or wildlife health and fish carrying the virus can be safely handled or consumed. VHSV can infect at least 37 species of fish including important sport and bait fish like Chinook and coho salmon, channel catfish, largemouth and rock bass, northern pike, spottail and emerald shiners.

Given the threat of large scale mortalities of valuable fish species, not to mention the risk to government and private hatcheries, it is critical to take action to contain VHS and reduce the spread of this disease within the Great Lakes *and* to inland waters.

Anglers and recreational boaters are asked to help protect our precious natural resources and prevent the spread of VHS by:

- **NOT** moving live fish or fish eggs between waterbodies; particularly baitfish.
- **DISPOSING** of leftover bait in suitable disposal area, not in the lake or stream.
- **INSPECTING** your boat, trailer and equipment and **REMOVING** visible aquatic plants, animals and mud before leaving the launch.
- **DRAINING** water from your boat, motor, bilge, live wells, and bait containers before leaving a body of water.
- **DISINFECTING** your boat, bilges and recreational equipment with a bleach solution (1 cup to 10 gallons).
- **DRYING** your boat/equipment for at least 4 to 6 hours in the sunlight

(Rinsing your boat, bilges, and recreational equipment with high-pressure water and drying for at least 5 days before entering new waters can also be effective)

If you observe large numbers of dead or dying fish on Lake Michigan or its tributary waters, please contact either Dave Meuninck or the Lake Michigan Fisheries office as soon as possible with the location of the mortality, approximate number of fish, species, and your name and phone number.

For more information on VHS, visit:

Indiana DNR: <http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/>

Michigan DNR: <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>

Wisconsin DNR: <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/fish/>

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Inspection Service:
<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/aqua>

Contacts: Dave Meuninck (574-255-4199)
 Lake Michigan Fisheries Office (219-874-6824)