

# A Muskies, Inc. & DNR Collaboration



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Capital City of Muskies, Inc. Board Members

## ...In the beginning...

*In 2004, a collaboration began between The Capital City Chapter of Muskies, Inc. (CCMI) of Madison, Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). The WDNR was interested in studying the differences between at least two different strains of muskie, and CCMI had similar interests as well as the enjoyment of have local lakes stocked with muskies for local anglers. Jim Olson, a Board Member of CCMI and Legal Counsel for Muskies, Inc. at the time, had reached out the WDNR to create what has become an annual event with the first in 2005. The WDNR has funded approximately 500 PIT tagged muskies from DNR hatcheries of either the Chippewa River or the Wisconsin River each year. CCMI funded approximately 500 PIT tagged muskies from The Leech Lake Hatchery in MN each year. Though the research continues and we currently have no definitive results, the following illustrates information on stocking the muskies, and the opinions of local fishermen.*

*Each PIT tag (12 mm long) is about the size of a grain of rice. Barring no tag ejection, each fish will carry the tag around for the rest of its life.*



*Muskies destined to receive PIT tags are first placed in a tub containing sedative (light blue, left) before being transferred to a holding tub (dark blue, right).*



*Here, a biologist uses a scanner connected to a computer to upload a fish's PIT tag ID into an electronic database.*



### **...What is PIT tagging anyways?**

Before PIT tagging (PIT stands for Passive Integrated Transponder) muskies was available to the DNR in 2005, approximately 500 Leech Lake strain fingerlings were tracked by clipping a fin on the left side. The Wisconsin River strain had a fin clipped on the right side. It wasn't until 2006 that the PIT tags were available to the DNR. These PIT tags are roughly the size of a grain of rice, and they are inserted into the fish using a syringe. The muskies are never harmed in the process as the DNR sedates the fish prior to injection. The DNR begins the stocking process by making sure the water temperature of the purchased muskies matches the water temperature of the lake to which they are going. Once confirmed, the muskies are transported in buckets of water from the live-well to holding nets in the lake. Once all fish have been transported, they make sure the sedation solution is correct, and test one or two muskies to make sure the timing for sedation is appropriate.

Once sedation has set in, commonly seen when the fish goes belly-up, the fish is moved to a bucket on the table, the PIT tag is inserted into the syringe, and a muskie is placed on the tagging table where a PIT tag is then inserted into the muskie. The muskie's tag ID is then scanned into an electronic database, and the length is measured and recorded. The lengths recorded at initial stocking varies usually between 8 and 12 inches. After records are taken, the muskies are put into a recovery tub. Once belly-down, the fish are transported to live wells on the boats. This process continues until all PIT tags have been distributed and the fish are ready to be released. CCMI is hoping to collect information from the DNR in the areas of success rate of each strain, rate of growth, and reproduction rates, if any. Of course, any additional data gathered by the DNR will also be appreciated by CCMI and local anglers.

### **...Tracking the fish**

Initially the DNR would use fyke netting in the spring and scan the muskies caught. However, this process did not happen every year, and the data would take a long time to collect. In 2010, CCMI became interested in providing additional support to the DNR and requested the purchase 10 scanners to distribute to willing master muskie anglers in the local area. Once they catch a muskie, they would scan the muskies and record accurate length of the muskie and date caught, and be willing to record that information into a database that is then shared with the DNR.

That year, 30 muskies were caught via fyke nets, and 42 muskies that had PIT tags were caught by anglers. The 30 netted muskies were all the Wisconsin strain. Had we relied only on the netting process, we could have concluded that the Leech Lake strain had not survived. That possibility could have meant a failure of the project to research these two strains, and the DNR may have discontinued the study; but 17 of the 42 muskies caught by anglers were the Leech Lake strain.

On October 29th, 2007 a healthy 13.6-inch Leech fingerling was stocked in Lake Monona. By June 29th, 2013 it had made its way to Lake Waubesa where it encountered the incomparable Jeff Hanson. She had grown to 42 inches in just under 6 years. The statewide average for a 40-inch fish is nine years, reported Jim Olson, CCMI. It is premature to make a comparison of the ultimate size of the two strains. However, 40-inch fish started appearing in the data in 2013. At that time there had been 4,106 Wisconsin strain muskies and 3,039 Leech Lake fish stocked with PIT tags.

By 2013, master angler Jeff Hanson, had caught well over 60 PIT tagged muskies and recorded them. His efforts in providing additional information for this research have been nothing less than heroic in providing an unbiased report and plethora of data. By the end of 2017, 19 Leech Lake strain 40+ inch PIT tagged muskies had been captured (17 anglers, 2 WDNR) and 7 Chippewa River strain 40+ inch PIT tagged

*(Article continued on page 24)*



muskies had been captured (2 anglers, 5 WDNR). The largest Leech Lake muskie was 48 inches captured by Jeff Hanson on July 1st, 2017. It had been stocked on November 13, 2008 as a 9.7-inch fingerling. The largest Chippewa River strain muskie was 44.5 inches also captured by Jeff Hanson on October 7th, 2017. It had been stocked on October 19th, 2010 as a 13.40-inch fingerling. – Recorded by Jeff Hanson. Steve Reinstra, Board Member of CCMI, has long kept the data for muskies collected via angler scanning. Recently Shane Nesheim took over this task of keeping the collected data.

### **...In Closing...**

Above all else, representatives from CCMI highly recommend connecting with your local DNR representatives to actively engage in helping the DNR increase their research opportunities around muskies. Most importantly, when great fishing is local to you, you have the opportunity to create active fishing opportunities for anglers in your local areas as well as create an interest for the next generation of muskie anglers. “The project has been an excellent example of cooperation between a governmental and not-for-profit organization.” – Steve Reinstra, CCMI. The project was funded by fundraising events by CCMI and generous grants from the Hugh C. Becker Foundation and the

*Jeff Hanson with a 48 inch Leech Lake strain muskie caught from Lake Monona that was originally stocked as a 9.7 inch fish in 2008.*



Madison Fishing Expo. Also, countless hours have been spent by WDNR in designing the study, PIT tagging fingerlings, fyke netting, and collecting the data. ▲▼▲

*A group of juvenile muskies confined in a net prior to stocking.*



*Bucket of muskie fingerlings being transported from truck to lake.*

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