

## **ECFSC FISH CHAIRMAN REPORT 04.23.2026**

### Chautauqua Lake Walleye Public Meeting - 03/25/2026

The meeting provided a comprehensive overview of walleye population dynamics in Chautauqua Lake, emphasizing that the fishery is largely driven by natural reproduction rather than stocking efforts. Fisheries staff outlined long-term data collected through fall electrofishing surveys, which track both young-of-year (YOY) and adult walleye populations. Historical trends show strong recruitment in the 1990s, followed by a prolonged period of weak year classes, with notable rebounds in 2014, 2015, and 2018. However, the most recent data indicates a concerning absence of measurable recruitment over the past five years, resulting in a declining and aging adult population now below the long-term average.

Discussion highlighted that stocking has had minimal impact on overall population levels, with studies showing that stocked fish contributed only a small percentage to the total population in key years. As a result, current management challenges center on factors influencing natural reproduction, including habitat conditions, predation, forage competition, and environmental variability. Participants raised concerns about siltation in tributaries, aquatic vegetation management, and broader ecosystem changes, all of which may affect spawning success and juvenile survival. While these factors are recognized as important, fisheries staff acknowledged the complexity of isolating any single cause due to the number of interacting variables within the lake system.

Management options discussed included regulatory adjustments such as increasing minimum size limits and reducing creel limits to allow more fish to reach spawning age. Moving from a 15-inch to an 18-inch minimum could provide additional spawning opportunities, potentially supporting population stability. However, regulatory changes are slow to implement and must be supported by biological justification. Stocking was widely discussed by attendees as a potential solution, but agency representatives noted that hatchery capacity constraints and limited demonstrated effectiveness make large-scale stocking an unlikely near-term remedy.

A broader theme emerged regarding the identity and expectations of the lake itself. Fisheries staff encouraged participants to consider whether Chautauqua Lake is realistically capable of sustaining a high-level walleye fishery or if it is better suited as a multi-species system dominated by panfish, bass, and other species. The discussion underscored that long-term fishery outcomes are shaped by ecological realities, not just management actions. Overall, the meeting reinforced that while walleye populations are currently in decline, the system has historically shown cyclical patterns, and future recovery will depend largely on the return of successful natural year classes combined with informed, adaptive management.

### Sturgeon Point Public Meeting - 04/01/2026

I attended the meeting in person, not much to report other than the final concept plan was presented by the engineering group to the town board and attending public. Public comments and questions were answered. The board voted unanimously in favor.

### Wright Beach Park Stakeholder Committee - 4/16/2026

I attended the Zoom meeting, there were multiple discussions over the conceptual drawings of the breakwater options and shoreline enhancements. I questioned the height of the breakwaters in the designs in reference to water levels, wind, wave and current directions. The wall designs are for five feet over water level, stationed in approximately five feet of water with the prevailing of west winds and current. My stated concerns, water levels frequently change 1 to 3 feet, waves frequently build 2 to 4 feet on moderate conditions, higher winds create 3

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to 6 feet with occasional peaks over 7. Prevailing winds are predominantly west or southwest, however during the fall and winter months wind direction changes occur regularly to northwest creating waves up to 12 feet or more. My question was, are any of these conditions built into the designs and will the breakwaters withstand the abuse year after year. Comments were taken under advisement. Next meeting is in person May 13, with public input after the presentation.

### NYSCC Fish & Marine Resources Committee Report - 4/18/2026

The Fisheries & Marine Committee has been reorganized to unify marine and freshwater interests, creating a stronger and more coordinated voice for anglers across New York State. The Committee now includes representation from diverse regions across the state and has begun meeting regularly to address key fisheries, conservation, and legislative issues affecting both inland and coastal waters.

During this reporting period, the Committee formally endorsed three resolutions: Resolution 03-2026 supporting improved saltwater angler representation, Resolution 05-2026 addressing tax incentives for land access (with additional comments), and Resolution 07-2026 supporting a constitutional right to hunt, trap, and fish. The Committee also agreed to defer review of legislative bills to the Spring Meeting to allow for a more comprehensive and coordinated discussion alongside final resolution consideration. A key development has been the active participation of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Bureau of Fisheries leadership, which has strengthened communication and provided valuable technical insight to the Committee.

The Committee continues to focus on several priority issues. Improving representation for private boat and shore-based anglers on fisheries management bodies remains a major concern, as these anglers make up the majority of participants but have limited influence in decision-making. Expanding public access to private lands for hunting, fishing, and trapping was also discussed, with support for incentives balanced by concerns related to liability, definitions of access, and potential impacts on local tax revenue. Fisheries management updates included general support for proposed season adjustments in response to shifting spawning patterns, as well as precautionary changes to walleye regulations aimed at protecting spawning stock and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Additional concerns include the continued impact of cormorants on stocked and wild fish populations, with ongoing mitigation efforts showing some success but requiring continued attention. The spread of invasive species, particularly Round Goby and the ongoing threat of Asian carp, remains a significant issue, with the Committee monitoring New York's involvement in regional prevention efforts such as the Brandon Road Project. Striped bass management and long-term planning were also discussed, including concerns about representation and recognition of key spawning areas.

Overall, the Committee's unified structure is improving coordination and strengthening statewide advocacy. Climate-related changes are increasingly influencing fisheries management decisions, and issues related to access, representation, and invasive species remain central to the Committee's work. Continued collaboration with the Department of Environmental Conservation is enhancing the Committee's effectiveness and ensuring that members are well-informed on emerging issues.

In the coming months, the Committee will finalize and present its resolution recommendations at the Spring Meeting, conduct a full review of relevant legislative bills, refine its recommendations regarding public access

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incentives, and continue coordination with DEC while monitoring key fisheries and conservation developments across the state.

### Niagara River Area of Concern - Remedial Advisory Committee - 04/20/2026

The April 20, 2026 RAC meeting focused on updates across multiple Niagara River Area of Concern (AOC) projects, progress on beneficial use impairments (BUIs), and coordination between U.S. and Canadian partners. Four major sediment remediation project areas were reviewed, including Black Rock Canal/Scajaquada Creek, Buffalo Outer Harbor/Ship Canal, Pettit Cove/Downstream area, and Two Mile Creek/Rattlesnake Creek. Each project is at a different stage, ranging from early investigation and sampling to feasibility study development and pre-design planning, with several timelines extending through 2027 and beyond. Coordination among agencies such as EPA, DEC, the Army Corps of Engineers, and private consultants remains ongoing, with an emphasis on integrating findings into future remedial investigation and feasibility study reports.

A significant portion of the discussion centered on the need for stronger and more consistent community engagement. Members emphasized that past successful efforts, particularly along the Buffalo River, relied heavily on proactive outreach, public meetings, and collaboration with local organizations. Concerns were raised that current projects lack a clearly defined outreach framework, and it was recommended that the advisory committee play a more active role in ensuring transparency and public input throughout the remediation process.

The committee also reviewed progress on ecological recovery, particularly the “degradation of fish and wildlife populations” BUI. Current efforts are focused on refining removal criteria and identifying priority management actions. Data analysis suggests that the fish community in the Niagara River is generally comparable to other Great Lakes systems, indicating moderate health rather than severe degradation. Future actions will likely prioritize native mussel restoration, fish community monitoring, and broader wildlife considerations, though challenges remain—particularly in defining measurable endpoints for “other wildlife” recovery.

A presentation from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service highlighted ongoing collaboration under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to accelerate native mussel restoration. This work includes pilot projects, development of standardized restoration protocols, and long-term monitoring strategies. While progress is being made, members acknowledged that mussel restoration is inherently slow and will require sustained effort beyond the current AOC program timeline.

Canadian partners provided an update on parallel efforts through Ontario’s remedial action plan, including a five-year delisting strategy (2025–2029), ongoing PCB sediment management in Lyons Creek East, and extensive habitat restoration work along the upper Niagara River. Their approach includes structured assessment frameworks, public engagement initiatives, and continued investment in shoreline naturalization and habitat connectivity projects.

Finally, the committee discussed fish consumption advisories as a key remaining BUI. Recent updates from the New York State Department of Health—including the addition of PFAS-related advisories—have complicated delisting criteria. Achieving parity with advisories in Lake Erie and Lake Ontario remains the benchmark, but

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evolving contaminant standards and emerging pollutants present ongoing challenges. Additional fish sampling is scheduled for 2026 to support future advisory revisions, though full resolution will depend on continued sediment remediation and long-term contaminant reduction trends.

Overall, the meeting underscored steady technical progress across projects, but also highlighted the need for clearer public engagement strategies, refined BUI endpoints, and coordinated binational efforts to achieve long-term restoration and eventual delisting of the Niagara River AOC.