

RESOLUTION IN RESPONSE TO INCREASING THREATS TO FISH HEALTH

WHEREAS, the bylaws of Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (MAFWA) include the following objectives with regard to fish and wildlife in the Midwest: protection of jurisdictional rights; evaluating state and federal laws and proposals; and securing cooperation from our citizenry to ensure protection, preservation, restoration and management of these resources; and

WHEREAS, health threats, which can adversely affect fish populations and associated societal food security and recreation values, continue to increase across the United States and Canada, and include but are not limited to: viral hemorrhagic septicemia, flavobacterium, whirling disease, Koi herpesvirus, spring viremia of carp virus, largemouth bass virus and sturgeon herpesviruses; and

WHEREAS, control of the fish disease vectors including the movement of untested or inadequately tested fish across borders by aquaculture interests, the baitfish industry, commercial shipping businesses, and individual anglers is a difficult challenge at this time, and heightens the need to increase cooperation across all jurisdictions; and

WHEREAS, MAFWA states and provinces are concerned that fish and wildlife agencies lack the capacity to respond adequately to these health threats due to inadequate staffing and overall capacity; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Plant Health Inspection Service – Veterinary Services (APHIS) has been actively working to expand its authorities over all aspects of aquaculture fish health and to reduce the role of states in regulating the movements of fish across borders, which has direct implications on wild and managed fish population that are critical public trust resources, through its interpretation and application of 7 USC Animal Health Protection Act, 16 USC National Aquaculture Act of 1980, and Executive Order 13291 (2020); and

WHEREAS, APHIS is currently working on the 2024-2026 update to the National Aquaculture Health Plan & Standards along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the NOAA - National Marine Fisheries Service, which appears to attempt to restrict the authorities of state fish and wildlife agencies to protect their public trust aquatic resources by codifying a weakened system of fish health verification and testing to allow for easier movement of aquatic organisms across state borders via the Comprehensive Aquaculture Health Plan Standards; and

WHEREAS, the process for updating the National Aquaculture Health Plan & Standards provides an opportunity to redress concerns with lack of understanding about public trust resources and the requirements and responsibilities of state fish and wildlife agencies for aquatic public trust resources, upon which aquaculture has direct effects through the movement of fish, stocking of private fish in public waters, and discharge of effluents from aquaculture facilities into public waters; and

WHEREAS, state fish and wildlife agencies should be regarded as full partners in national aquaculture and fish health policy discussions, and thus every effort made to require full consultation and concurrence on all fish health matters that have the potential to affect state public trust aquatic resources; and

WHEREAS, the Midwest Fish and Wildlife Health Committee encourages MAFWA to adopt this resolution at its 2024 annual meeting;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that MAFWA supports the need to invest resources in expanding state and provincial fish health programs and to seek additional resources for these programs; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the MAFWA directors will ask their respective fish health program staffs to jointly review and respond to the APHIS-led 2024-2026 update and all future updates to the National Aquaculture Health Plan & Standards and ensure that the appropriate roles for state fish and wildlife agencies are prescribed by this plan, that state fish and wildlife agencies are fully recognized partners in protecting aquatic public trust resources with respect to the activities of aquaculture, and to ensure that it has no measurable effects on these resources; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that MAFWA hereby directs its Fish and Wildlife Health Committee to develop and implement an aquaculture and aquatic health sub-committee to facilitate improved: flow of information on fish health and aquaculture issues; coordination of state and provincial policies on aquaculture and fish health; and capacity in the Midwest to protect public trust resources from potentially adverse aquacultural activities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that MAFWA recognizes the urgency of this issue and will request the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies at its 2024 annual meeting to also expeditiously develop and implement an aquaculture and aquatic health workgroup under its Fish and Wildlife Health Committee to help effect the aforementioned improvements to our communication, policy coordination, and protection actions for the benefit of public trust aquatic resources across North America.