

STAFF GUIDELINES
CONTROL OF VIRAL HEMORRHAGIC SEPTICEMIA (VHS)
MARCH 29, 2007

The following guidelines are provided for clarity and consistency in the implementation of management actions to document and control the spread of VHS from currently documented VHS positive waters to other waters within the province. Questions or unusual circumstances not covered in the guidelines should be directed to the appropriate staff contact.

1) Definition of positive waters

VHS positive waters are now defined as the waters of Lakes Ontario, Erie and Huron (including Georgian Bay), their connecting waterways and adjacent tributaries up to the first impassable barrier for all fish species. Where fish are manually transferred over barriers or pass through a fishway, that barrier will not be considered to be impassable. Low head lamprey weirs or dams that do not normally stop salmonid passage also are not considered impassable. Waters associated with the Rideau Lakes/Trent Severn waterways are considered to be VHS free at the current time.

MNR is working with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to undertake a surveillance program for 2007 to provide better information on the current distribution of VHS.

2) Wild spawn collections

Staff contact - Scott Watson, Fish Culture Section (705) 755-1823

- a) Salmonids – No restrictions will be imposed on collection of salmonid eggs from VHS positive waters if all eggs are disinfected during water-hardening as per the MNR VHS disinfection protocol (dated October 10, 2006). Spawn collections (any species) from positive waters without disinfection in accordance with the approved protocol, will only be approved if the rearing facility is located in VHS positive waters and all fish in the facility will be stocked into VHS positive waters.

Any new licences (Licence to Collect Fish for Aquaculture) issued for the collection of gametes for salmonids from positive waters should contain the following condition to avoid restrictions as per a) above:

“All wild salmonid eggs collected must be treated during water hardening according to the MNR approved VHS-disinfection protocol (dated October 10, 2006) and documented for reporting to and audit by MNR”

A practical disinfection procedure based on the MNR VHS-disinfection protocol is described in *Fish Culture Technical Bulletin – Best Management Practices – Egg Disinfection and Incubation Procedures, BMP 2007- 01* (separate attachment).

Appropriate measures must also be taken to avoid VHS cross-contamination of the eggs, equipment and rearing facilities. Refer to the BMP bulletin for applicable procedures and recommended practices.

- b) Walleye – There currently is no approved disinfection procedure for non-salmonids. Walleye spawn collections from positive waters will only be allowed if they are to be stocked into positive waters and the receiving culture facility is located in the VHS-positive zone (i.e., discharges effluent to positive waters). The Ministry will endeavour to supply, free of charge, reasonable numbers of eggs to partner non-profit groups from its internal VHS-free captive adult walleye stock for projects where genetics are not a concern. If supplies allow and partner requests are met, the Ministry will also supply eggs to the private sector on a cost recovery basis (approximately \$21/1000) or equivalent (exchange of fish such as catchable rainbow trout for eggs). There is also the option to look for other spawn collection sources outside of VHS positive waters.

Walleye egg collections that have historically collected from identified VHS positive waters to meet partner and private sector requirements, should be screened and prioritized by the applicable district. Districts are encouraged to proactively contact impacted partners and private sector operators to determine their interest in receiving eggs. Requirements should be forwarded from the District Stocking Coordinator to Scott Watson by April 23rd, 2007, so that decisions can be made on distributions of available Ministry eggs.

- c) Muskellunge - Fish culture staff are currently working with district staff and two partners including Sir Sandford Fleming College to develop a process for muskellunge egg collections, VHS-disinfection, culture using appropriate bio-secure facilities and fish health testing of fish for Lake Simcoe and a Great Lakes rehabilitation request. Details on this process will be provided separately as they develop, to appropriate individuals involved with the project.

Community Fisheries and Wildlife Involvement Program (CFWIP) applications should only be approved and funded for any projects that are in compliance with these guidelines. Conditions in letters of agreement with partners should reflect any necessary controls as per the guidelines.

Any other egg collections from positive waters, other than the above should be discussed with Scott Watson.

3) Aquaculture operations

Staff contact - Scott Watson, Fish Culture Section (705) 755-1823

Fish currently in facilities (private or partner) where eggs were collected prior to this spring will not have restrictions retroactively placed on stocking or transfers.

Any eggs, or fish cultured from eggs, collected from VHS positive waters this spring and henceforth for which the proponent cannot certify or demonstrate that their eggs, fish or facility water supply are VHS free will be restricted to stocking into VHS positive waters only. This could include demonstrating their eggs were properly disinfected and their water supply is outside of VHS positive waters, or that fish health testing has indicated the fish are VHS free.

Use of live feeds (i.e., sucker fry, minnows or other wild-origin fish species) for feeding any fish at rearing facilities must also comply with these spawn collection and aquaculture operations guidelines. Use of such live feed is generally not recommended as it poses a fish health risk to culture operations. If live feed is used it must come from VHS-free water sources. Live feeds taken from VHS-positive waters will result in a VHS-positive designation for the rearing facility and all fish produced at that facility, in which case the facility must be located in the VHS-positive zone and all its fish must either be stocked only in positive waters or killed for processing before leaving the rearing site.

CFWIP applications should only be approved and funded for any projects that are in compliance with these guidelines. Conditions in letters of agreement with partners should reflect any necessary controls as per the guidelines.

4) Harvest and transfer of baitfish

Staff contact: Chris Brousseau, Fisheries Section (705) 755-1231

MNR is working with the BAO to implement the following changes:

- Expanding the VHS positive zone to include FMZ's 13 and 14.
- Redefining the VHS positive zone boundary to include barriers to fish migration on tributaries and road networks based on local assessment
- Removing the interim Buffer control zone
- Re-instatement of commercial harvest within the VHS positive zone subject to additional restrictions on fish movement to within the zone only

The above will require licence amendments for all commercial bait licences. Guidelines are forthcoming that will provide a consistent and timely approach to these changes once a final approach has been developed and approved. This is expected by early May.

5) Fishway operations and fish transfers

Staff Contact: Steve Kerr, Fisheries Section (705) 755-1205

Movement of migratory fish over barriers via fishways or by manual transfer, that were in place for 2006 or earlier, will continue to be allowed for 2007 spring and fall. No **new** fish passage will be considered without an impact assessment which evaluates criteria including:

- species of fish impacted and involved,
- number of fish in the spawning run,
- relative importance of spawning population/recruitment
- amount of additional water to which access is gained,
- impacts on other resource users, and
- the status of the species being considered.

Fish and Wildlife Branch approval is required to approve any new expansion due to transfers or fishways. Circumstances and requests should be forwarded to Steve Kerr.

The decision to allow ongoing fishway operations and transfers for 2007 is for a one year period pending acquisition of better surveillance information, additional consultation with stakeholders and a detailed risk assessment of each location to determine a longer term position. This will be completed prior to the 2008 spring operations. Further details will be provided on this process once available.

CFWIP applications should only be approved and funded for any projects that are in compliance with these guidelines. Conditions in letters of agreement with partners should reflect any necessary controls as per the guidelines.

6) Scientific collector's permits

Staff contact: Cheryl Goodchild, Fisheries Section (705) 755-1911

The Ministry has limited authority to impose additional conditions based on the current OFRs. The Ministry can request, however, the applicant to address specific concerns as part of the application process and consider the applicant's response and proposed controls in deciding whether to issue a permit or not. Applications for Scientific Collector permits for collection and transfer of live fish from VHS positive waters must address collection, disposal of fish and treatment of effluent to minimize spread of VHS.

A copy of Best Management Practices are being prepared and will be available in the near future. These should be provided, once available, with all approved Scientific Collector permits involving fish collected from VHS positive waters.

7) Transport and sale of live commercial (food) fish

Staff contact: John Johnson, Lake Erie Mgt. Unit (519) 873-4614

Transport and sale of live fish is considered a low risk. The Ministry will implement an education/public awareness campaign targeted at live fish wholesalers and retailers to minimize potential for spread of VHS through this activity.