

A record number of spearers are expected for the Feb. 11, 2012 opening day of the Winnebago System Sturgeon Spearing Season and they will find more trophy-sized fish, higher harvest caps for the most prized fish, adult female sturgeon, and the potential for a longer season, state fish biologists say.

"We've seen a steady increase in the adult lake sturgeon stock in the last decade so we've been able to raise the harvest caps again for 2012, which should translate into more spearing opportunities and possibly a longer season," says Ron Bruch, Department of Natural Resources fisheries supervisor in Oshkosh. "That's good news for spearers and for the local economy, which sees an economic impact of more than \$3.5 million for the average 10-day season."

In 2011, DNR estimated there were 16,560 females and 30,260 males in the adult spawning stock. The harvest caps for adult females have increased to 745 on Lake Winnebago and 83 on the Upriver Lakes for 2012, up from 711 and 79 respectively.

A record 12,680 people bought licenses by the Oct. 31, 2011 deadline to spear during the upcoming season, up from the previous record of 12,423 set last year, and up nearly 50 percent since 2007. Bruch credits the growing participation in part to excitement over the significant increase in trophy-sized lake sturgeon in the system.

Trophy-sized fish are those 100 pounds or larger, and last year, spearers harvested 94 of them. That's about 7.5 percent of the 1,426 fish harvested, up from less than 1 percent in most years. And DNR fisheries crews regularly see fish in excess of 200 pounds during spawning surveys on the Wolf River. The record fish of 212 pounds was harvested from Lake Winnebago in 2010. Regulation changes developed through a joint effort by DNR and the Winnebago Citizens sturgeon Advisory Committee since 1993 have led to the an increase in sturgeon numbers and trophy-sized fish.

"The sturgeon harvest management system we currently have in place on the Winnebago System is a world model," Bruch says. "Key to our success is not only effective control of harvest, but also the process we use to pro-actively involve the public in our sturgeon management program; the public has great ownership and pride in this program."