

Oneida Lake Association, Inc.—PO Box 3536—Syracuse, NY 13220
It's Your Lake—Help Us Preserve It!

October 27, 2010

To: NYS DEC

Cc: New York State Conservation Council
Onondaga County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs
Oswego County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs
Onondaga County Fisheries Advisory Board
B.A.S.S. National Conservation Director
B.A.S.S. New York Federation Chapter Conservation Chair

Re: Reiteration of Oneida Lake Association, Inc.'s Position on
Springtime Risks to Spawning Fish

On behalf of our 3,000+ members and ALL people who fish Oneida Lake or benefit from fishing's economic impact, I write to remind you that:

The Board of Directors of the Oneida Lake Association, Inc. resolutely opposes expanding fishing seasons on Oneida Lake to early-spring weeks when important and spawning fish stocks are most vulnerable to accidental disturbance or illegal catch.

To underscore our point, we ask all regulators, conservation groups and tournament organizers to be mindful of the risks of too-liberal regulations. **We request that all parties halt efforts to advance new regulations that would increase risk to Oneida Lake fisheries before the traditional walleye season opener.**

The reasons for opposing more liberal fishing seasons are unchanged since 2005 when the issue arose on Oneida Lake. In short, we believe that a small number of weeks of extended catch-and-release bass fishing on this lake will pose an unacceptably large risk to its unique populations of fishes, especially walleyes. The need to protect all kinds of fishing is highlighted by new threats:

- v Walleye and yellow perch populations have been devastated by the long-term effects of cormorants, zebra mussels, and other ecological shifts that are poorly understood;
- v New York has lost its federally funded cormorant management program;
- v New invasive species and fish diseases like round gobies, hemimysis, and VHS are rapidly spreading toward Oneida Lake and waters connected to it;
- v Local law enforcement officers have publicly expressed concerns about their

effectiveness in enforcing laws against disturbance of spawning walleyes; and

- v Multi-million dollar cuts to DEC will likely hamper management and law enforcement.

Walleye is the fish that made Oneida Lake famous, and it accounts for 70 percent of angling effort. Walleye and yellow perch account for at least \$50 million of Oneida Lake's economic impact. Bass fishing is increasingly popular and generates a smaller but growing and very welcome revenue stream. No other inland New York lake has as large a population of bass as Oneida. We should protect these resources more conservatively, not less.

Approximately six years ago, DEC at the urging of tournament angling groups offered the possibility of year-round catch-and-release bass fishing. OLA objected because the risk far outweighs the reward. Since then, some DEC wildlife managers have sought to minimize concerns that springtime bass nests could be harmed by more angling pressure, but they have yet to produce enough evidence to reassure us this is so.

As for walleye, our concerns center on the period when pre-spawn and spawning walleyes are extremely vulnerable. Typically, ice prevents Oneida Lake boating access from mid-December to nearly April. To protect walleyes until the spawning period is largely over, Environmental Conservation Law 11-1301 and 11-1321 closes Oneida Lake to walleye fishing or disturbing walleyes on their spawning ground from March 15 until the early May walleye opener. Angler boat traffic is low before the walleye opener because of this law, but to this day, we observe a few anglers blatantly catching walleye from boats at this time of year by pretending to be other kinds of (legal) fishermen, but (illegally) using tackle and bait that is only suited for walleyes.

The law and our observations reflect the well documented history of individuals poaching large numbers of walleye with spears, fishing poles, and other implements, hiding under darkness or in the guise of anglers for other fish species. One of OLA's founding missions in 1945 was to prevent this illegal harvest by promoting and helping fund law enforcement. For its part, DEC has historically had to increase law enforcement on the lake and its tributaries during the weeks prior to the walleye opener. Since all parties should be concerned about protecting walleye during this spawning period and closed season, we feel it is common sense that any increase in fishing-related boat traffic prior to early May increases the risk of illegal harvest by those poachers who would seek to "blend in" among a larger group of legal anglers. And, we believe that even people who intend to abide by the law are likely to break ECL 11-1321 if they angle with large-fish tackle during this period.

Because of the increasing stresses on this already stressed ecosystem, OLA has repeatedly asked DEC to refrain from risky regulations. OLA's conservation mission has driven several years' worth of public comment and good-faith discussions between us and parties including DEC, B.A.S.S. Federation and various advisory boards. So, in 2006 when it became clear that a compromise could be reached to promote bass angling without increasing risk to other species, we agreed to do it. At that time OLA, B.A.S.S. representatives and DEC agreed to set Oneida Lake's bass season to open concurrent with walleye season but not before. DEC reaffirmed this

compromise when they renewed the regulation in 2008.

But since then, some parties have not respected the compromise and have continued relentless pursuit of year-round bass fishing on Oneida Lake. Most recent direct and indirect efforts to unravel the compromise appear to be led by representatives of the New York B.A.S.S. Federation working in venues such as fisheries advisory boards and sportsmen's federations.

These efforts have failed. Similar efforts have failed on some other waters in upstate New York with even worse results for bass anglers: on a few waters with substantial bass populations, there is no compromise and therefore **no** legal bass angling before the traditional late-June opening.

OLA has a 65-year tradition as a non-profit environmental group. Our membership includes more than 3,000 fishermen, hunters, boaters, paddlers, property and business owners, and others. We are full members of the New York State Conservation Council and the Onondaga County Federation of Sportsmen, among other affiliations. We are not opposed to open process. We gauged our membership's interests on the issue four years ago and have since participated in good faith in DEC's public comment process.

So as we have in the past, we remind everyone again that because of ice-out dates, the most to be gained from changing this regulation is one to four weeks' additional bass fishing—and the most that could be lost is a world-class walleye fishery.

The most significant point is that the one to four weeks in question are exactly when walleye spawn on Oneida Lake. These fish are incredibly vulnerable to poaching or accidental bycatch—and **the OLA does not believe that benefits of just a little more bass fishing outweigh the major damage that can be done to walleyes during this short time.**

We appreciate the work of DEC, OCFAB, B.A.S.S. Federation, and other groups on Oneida Lake issues. In particular, we are grateful for the B.A.S.S. anglers who recently participated in cormorant management; and all parties' work to support the restoration of the federal program.

But we do not believe the season-expansion crusade by local B.A.S.S. leaders is supported by informed people who know Oneida Lake's history and care about its long-term health, regardless of their angling habits. It is not common sense to subject vital fisheries to potential loss for just one to four weeks more of catch-and-release bass fishing. Therefore, we again request the halt of all attempts to make such a risky regulation. Thank you for considering our request.

Yours truly,

Matthew R. Snyder
President