

**HIGGINS LAKE SWIMMER'S ITCH ORGANIZATION  
P.O. DRAWER 665, GRAYLING, MI 49738**

October 27, 2017

Dear HLSIO Supporters and Members of the Higgins Lake Community,

Attached is the Swimmer's Itch Solutions (SIS) Final Report for the 2017 HLSIO swimmer's itch (SI) summer program. The outstanding work of Dr. Curt Blankespoor and his team of scientists and engineers (Swimmer's Itch Solutions (SIS) replaced SICON during 2017) delivered a third consecutive year of removal of 100% of brood ducks from the lake. Higgins Lake has been essentially cleared of common mergansers during the critical summer period over the past three years because of the HLSIO/SICON/SIS work. The objective snail infection levels and anecdotal reports continue to tell the same story----SI has been significantly reduced in Higgins Lake (over 98% in 3 years.)

We must remain vigilant and committed to a long-term effort to maintain, and hopefully further improve, on these excellent results. Our primary focus remains on Higgins Lake. However, our collaboration with other lakes through the Michigan Swimmer's Itch Partnership (MISIP) is critical to our long term success. HLSIO will end 2017 with a positive financial balance thanks to your generous financial support. We have also received or been allocated approximately \$136,000 from the two state appropriations that now total \$500,000. This includes \$24,000 recently allocated to help pay for past HLSIO financial obligations and an additional \$22,000 that will be applied to our 2018 program.

Your HLSIO board is continuously working to drive down future SI control program maintenance costs using trained and qualified personnel. The 2017 HLSIO program costs were less than half of program costs for 2015 and 2016. We expect 2018 HLSIO program costs will be reduced further. We have shifted important research, training and education projects and their costs to MISIP. MISIP successfully trained two new biologists this summer to conduct trap and relocation of common mergansers. More trained, properly equipped and qualified personnel will make the market more competitive and expand trap and relocation program availability to more lakes. HLSIO is sharing lobbying costs with other lakes to gain further state appropriations. We believe this approach puts Higgins Lake in the best position for long-term, affordable SI control moving forward. Eight new and valuable SI research projects have been recommended by the MISIP Scientific Review Committee and approved by the MISIP steering committee. We will be sharing information about these projects and seeking private and foundation funding that will advance the scientific knowledge of SI, increase affordability of control programs and improve our ability to control SI. Our ultimate goal is no reports of SI on Higgins Lake.

HLSIO and MISIP continue to work closely with the Michigan DNR and US Fish and Wildlife Service. During the past year we have collaborated on the development of a multi-year permit proposal for future SI control on Higgins and other lakes in Michigan beginning in the summer of 2018. While we were repeatedly advised by DNR Wildlife and US Fish and Wildlife staff over the past year that harassment with limited lethal take would not be included among the options for a future permit, we just learned that it was added by the Michigan DNR Executive office into the DNR proposal. We are investigating how this last minute change occurred and whether USFWS concurs in the proposal. Under the proposed rules which were released on October 26, use of artificial nest boxes to lure and kill nesting hens and destroy their eggs will continue to be banned by the DNR and USFWS. We have until November 10 to provide our comments to the proposed permit rules.

HLSIO has repeatedly shared the compelling science, data and decades of experience that establishes trap and relocation as the only demonstrated effective and sustainable means of controlling SI. This method of SI control was first successfully used by SICON beginning at Glen Lake in the 1980's. Higgins Lake has now replicated the Glen Lake experience with its three year trap and relocation program. Four other lakes in Michigan began their own trap and relocation programs this past summer and data from those programs will be gathered, analyzed and made available next year. We expect other trap and relocation programs on other lakes to begin in the near future as costs decrease and the supply of properly trained, equipped and qualified personnel increases through MISIP training programs.

The science, data and experience on Higgins and other Michigan lakes continues to demonstrate that spring harassment and spring harassment with limited lethal take is not an effective method for reducing SI infection in a lake. Spring harassment and spring harassment with limited lethal take programs target the wrong ducks at the wrong time of the year when SI infection risk is very low. This type of program depends entirely on the subsequent 100% effective brood removal program of trap and relocation for its claimed effectiveness. If necessary, we will detail all of our findings in the upcoming public comment on the proposed new permit rules, including the recent experience with harassment on Glen and Crystal Lakes.

Consistent with the science, data and decades of experience, we will urge the DNR and USFWS to not allow a spring harassment or spring harassment with lethal take program on a single lake at the same time a spring and summer trap and relocation program is being conducted. Currently, the proposed draft states, "Timing of harassment options should be taken into consideration with other control activities to ensure efficacy of each control method." So the DNR draft recognizes and supports our concern about conflicting control activities. We will support a DNR permit rule that allows a fall harassment or fall harassment with limited lethal take program if a spring and summer trap and relocation program is also being conducted for the reasons listed below. We will support the continuation of a Scientific Collectors Permit like the one held by Dr. Curt Blankespoor which allowed him to lethally take a limited number of common mergansers over the past three years. You will see from the attached Final Report that

Dr. Blankespoor lethally took 5 hens in 2017 to gain additional scientific knowledge. We believe the type of collaborative dual program timing described above maximizes the effectiveness of both programs, eliminates any conflict and provides the greatest SI reduction benefit for the lake. The HLSIO board is interested in working with Gerrish/Northpoint to jointly sponsor and fund a dual lake program timed in this way. We much prefer working together on the upcoming rulemaking and our summer programs to maximize the benefits for the lake

HLSIO has long advocated retiming the Gerrish/Northpoint spring harassment with limited lethal take program to the fall when it will not interfere with the HLSIO trap and relocation program and it could potentially help reduce SI infection in the lake. We believe the remaining low level of SI infection in Higgins Lake is due to two factors, fall common merganser fly-through ducks and other SI life cycles that involve other species of ducks and snails. HLSIO and MISIP are working to address both of these concerns. Unlike the early spring, when conditions are not conducive to SI infection, we believe Higgins Lake remains vulnerable to SI infection in the fall when the water is still relatively warm, common mergansers are briefly stopping on Higgins Lake during their fall migration south and snails can easily be infected. Some fall fly-throughs can be highly-infected first year birds that have spent a flightless summer on another highly infected lake. Decades of research has demonstrated first year common merganser ducks are highly infected compared to older adults. The approximately 50 common merganser ducks killed in the Gerrish/Northpoint program and turned over to SICON for necropsies confirmed the prior research. Approximately half of the ducks were male, half were not infected with SI and nearly all of the remainder were only lightly infected. Over 200 common merganser brood ducks were left on the lake over the three year Gerrish/Northpoint harassment program. All of those brood ducks were subsequently captured and relocated by the HLSIO/SICON/SIS program. Future MISIP research will include gaining a better understanding of the role non-common-merganser and stagnicola snail life cycles play in northern Michigan SI lake infections. While a fall harassment program has never been tested, we believe that a fall program might be effective in chasing away ducks that are not nesting and intend to only spend a few days on the lake, and it will not interfere with the HLSIO/SIS spring trap and relocation program.

Fall common merganser fly-throughs are beginning to appear on Higgins Lake. We did not get enough volunteers to support a proposed volunteer, fall pyrotechnic harassment program. However, we are in the middle of duck hunting season. While likely not as effective as a dedicated fall harassment program, any hunting on the lake can potentially help chase common mergansers away from Higgins Lake and it will not interfere with our spring trap and relocation program. So we want to encourage duck hunting on Higgins Lake during the fall hunting season. You will need to be familiar with state laws that can be found on the DNR website. A brief summary of key provisions is as follows:

The most difficult aspect of hunting from shore is complying with the rule that you may not discharge a firearm within 450' of a dwelling. This means that for 450' in either

direction of the shoreline you are shooting from you must have the permission of the owners of the dwellings within that distance. Permission in writing is not required but is "best practice." In many areas around the lake, the distance can be eliminated by hunting offshore by 450'. In other areas of the lake, going off shore by 450' puts you in 100'+ of water.

In addition to the shooting distance requirement, here are some other differences between hunting ducks vs other small game.

- 1) You must use non-lead shot (usually steel.)
- 2) The capacity of your chamber and magazine cannot exceed 3 shells. If your gun is capable of chambering 5 shells, it is not "good enough" to only load in three. You may not use a rifle to hunt ducks. Only shotguns are allowed.
- 3) You must have a "duck stamp" endorsement on your small game license. Having only the small game license is insufficient.
- 4) You need to know what kind of duck you are attempting to kill. Some ducks have restrictive bag limits while others do not. The information on bag limits can be found online at the DNR website.
- 5) You cannot pursue a duck in a boat that is under motorized power.

All of the above information is available on the DNR website.

Thank you again for all of your support! The year-end is a good time to take advantage of the tax benefits of giving to HLSIO so we can continue this important work. HLSIO is a 501 (c)(3) tax exempt organization. More than 95% of contributions are used to support our programs.

Make your check out to HLSIO.

HLSIO's mailing address is: P.O. Drawer 665, Grayling, Michigan, 49738

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