

LAKE ERIE COMMITTEE
POSITION STATEMENT
ON
Lake Erie Cisco Rehabilitation

Within the Great Lakes Fisheries management community there has been an increasing interest in coregonine rehabilitation, and especially cisco. There are ongoing discussions and planning occurring, with hatchery space being set aside for coregonine production. This is understandable, especially given the open niches in many lakes that have been created as a result of forage fish collapse. Additionally, cisco are thought to be a more stable alternative to invasive smelt and alewife and are a potential “missing link” in Lake Trout rehabilitation success.

Within the foreseeable future, the Lake Erie Committee (LEC) is not planning to proceed with cisco rehabilitation. The reasons are:

- 1) Climate change - Lake Erie is the warmest and shallowest of the Great Lakes. This means that it is already marginal habitat for coregonids. With climate change impacts becoming more and more apparent and expected to worsen, it is expected that Lake Erie will become even less hospitable for cold water fish. Coupled with the anoxia brought about by increased nutrients habitat conditions will get worse.
- 2) Forage base complexity and smelt predation – Lake Erie contains large populations of planktivorous fish, including gizzard shad, smelt and alewife. These species (particularly smelt) not only compete for resources, they are also predators on coregonids’ eggs and larvae. LEC does not feel that there is currently an open niche for cisco.
- 3) Status of existing coregonids – Ciscoes are now considered extirpated in Lake Erie, although a specimens have been observed over the past two decades. Lake Erie is experiencing declining Lake Whitefish populations and poor recruitment.
- 4) Contemporary cisco collections have originated from Lake Huron; there is currently no evidence that these fish are serving as founders for a new stock, in part because of points 1 and 2 above. We believe that underlying habitat issues are restricting the scope for any recovery of coregonid populations.
- 5) Distribution of available hatchery-reared fish to locations deemed most plausible for achieving rehabilitation – Because of the issue above, we believe at this time Lake Erie should not be considered a destination for these precious resources that could be utilized to better effect elsewhere.

The LEC members remain committed to assist any of our Great Lakes colleagues with their Cisco rehabilitation efforts in any way we can. Reflecting on the recent examination of Lake Erie cisco impediments, additional research to better understand where rehabilitation of cisco stocks may be most promising would seem particularly useful. We wish all of you the best success in your own work.