

**DATE:** March 26, 2008

**CONTACTS:** Mike Staggs (608) 267-0796

**SUBJECT:** *Anglers could use leftover minnows under revised VHS proposals NRB adopts revised rules to meet legislative concerns, deadline*

**MADISON, Wis.** – Anglers could take leftover minnows purchased from a Wisconsin bait dealer home and use them on the same waterbody, or use them on a different one if the minnows hadn't been exposed to any water from the lake or river fished, under revised rules to prevent the spread of VHS fish disease that were adopted March 26 by the state Natural Resources Board.

The unanimous vote came after board members heard from DNR Deputy Secretary Pat Henderson and DNR Fisheries Director Mike Staggs that there was strong bipartisan legislative opposition to provisions of the VHS rules the board had adopted last fall that prohibited anglers from taking leftover minnows home and using them on another fishing trip.

Viral hemorrhagic septicemia, or VHS, is a fish disease that does not affect humans but can kill native pan fish, bait fish and game fish. It was first detected in Wisconsin in May 2007 in the Lake Winnebago system and Lake Michigan system.

Henderson said that lawmakers would be unlikely to sign off on any VHS rules that did not allow anglers to use leftover minnows, and the state could have no rules in place to protect fish after April 7, when existing emergency rules expire. The inland regular fishing season opener is approaching May 3 and Wisconsin is entering the time period in which fish are most vulnerable to the disease.

Board member Jonathan Ela said that the legislatively requested changes arguably provide less protection against the spread of VHS due to the difficulty in enforcing the rules.

Staggs told board members that allowing anglers to take leftover minnows home if they follow certain conditions could ultimately do the job of preventing VHS from spreading. “I’m hopeful it will shift attention back from anglers being angry about one part of the rule” to understanding that VHS is a serious fish health issue.

Staggs told board members that bait minnows are the main way in which VHS is spread to new waters, so that changes made to allow more movement of minnows could increase the risk of transmission. However, if more anglers support the revised rules, there will be better compliance, and fish will be better protected than if anglers are frustrated or ignore the current rules, he said.

Under the revised rules, anglers may keep leftover minnows bought from a Wisconsin bait dealer or fish farm and use them on the same water; or they may take these leftover minnows home and use them on another lake or river if the minnows were not exposed to any water from previously fished lakes or rivers. For anglers intending to fish a different water with the leftover minnows, that means the water in the container holding the minnows must be from the bait store or from a well or tap and not from the lake or river fished.

The revised rules also allow an additional exemption to provisions requiring all people to drain all water from bilges, ballast, live wells, bait buckets and other containers when they leave the bank or shore of any water. People may take away up to 2 gallons of water in a container holding those live minnows to be transported away from the waterbody.

The revised rules seek to further reduce the risk of spreading VHS by prohibiting people from harvesting wild minnows for bait from VHS-infected

waters for personal use because such wild minnows are not tested or inspected, as are minnows sold by registered bait dealers in Wisconsin. Under current VHS rules, people were prohibited from harvesting bait fish from VHS-infected waters for commercial sale but not for personal use. Waters considered infected include lakes and rivers in the Lake Winnebago, Lake Michigan, Lake Superior and Mississippi River watersheds up to the first dam or barrier impassable to fish.

The rest of the VHS rule provisions adopted in December 2007 for boaters, anglers and people who harvest bait stay the same. The rules now go to the legislative Assembly Committee on Natural Resources for their review within 10 days, and the Joint Committee for the Review of Administrative Rules will consider extending the emergency rules before April 7.