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BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Fiscal Agency

Lansing, Michigan 48909

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House Bill 4020 (as reported without amendment)

Sponsor: Representative Donald Van Singel

House Committee: Tourism, Fisheries, and Wildlife

Senate Committee: Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs

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MICHIGAN LEGISLATURE

RATIONALE

The Michigan Sports Fishing Law was amended in 1984 specifically to allow the snagging of coho and chinook salmon from September 10 to October 25 on specified portions of the Sable, Pere Marquette, Big Manistee, and Muskegon Rivers. Snagging, a method of fishing whereby anglers drag lines with double and treble snagging hooks through migrating schools of fish, has at times been allowed on all waterways of the State. Widespread complaints of snaggers trespassing on private property, littering, damaging river banks, and in general causing ecological damage led the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to reduce the number of places where snagging was allowed and plan eventually to eliminate it altogether. (See BACKGROUND for more information.) It has been suggested that recent complaints from property owners along the Muskegon River concerning snaggers, coupled with the claim by the DNR that the Muskegon River is an important salmon spawning river that has shown a decline in recent years in the number of spawning salmon, indicate that it is time for snagging to be prohibited on this river.

CONTENT

The bill would amend the Michigan Sports Fishing Law to prohibit the snagging of coho and chinook salmon in that portion of the Muskegon River where snagging currently is allowed (between the Croton Dam and the access site located at Pine Avenue in Newaygo County).

MCL 303.11

BACKGROUND

According to widespread reports, the Great Lakes by the mid-1960s had become a tourist and sportfisher's nightmare. Pollution, exploitation, and predation by the sea lamprey had taken their toll on the predator fish populations so popular for sportfishing, leaving large numbers of prey fish such as the smelt and alewife in the lakes. Prey fish are of much less commercial and recreational value than predator fish such as salmon and lake trout, and when the predator fish population became depleted, there were no longer any natural controls on the prey fish populations. The prey fish, especially the alewife, reproduced so rapidly and in such quantity that soon vast numbers of fish carcasses were polluting Michigan beaches.

In order to eliminate the alewife pollution problem, reestablish an ecological balance in the Great lakes, and encourage the establishment and growth of the sportfishing industry, the DNR in 1966 began to stock the lakes with salmon and lake trout. Repeated stocking of salmon, the success rate of natural spawning, and the abundance of small prey fish for the salmon to feed on encouraged a rapid increase in the salmon population and led to the migration of salmon to all of the State's rivers and Great Lakes tributaries. By 1967 major runs of salmon had begun to appear in Michigan rivers. The unanticipated result of the introduction and migration of the salmon was a general fouling of the rivers and their banks as large numbers of salmon escaped traditional salmon fishers, migrated upstream, and died. In order to establish an ecological balance, this time in the State's rivers, and to eliminate the pollution of the rivers by salmon carcasses, the DNR decided to permit snagging. Between 1968 and 1971 snagging was legal on all the State's waterways.

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Although the practice of snagging helped solve the surplus salmon problem, it apparently created several additional problems. There were complaints of snaggers trespassing on private property, littering, damaging river banks, and destroying the natural habitat of other fish and wildlife. In the early 1970s, the DNR began to restrict the uses of snagging; by 1984 there were only five sites left where snagging was legally permitted. The DNR planned to eliminate two more sites that year and eventually phase out snagging completely. The proposed elimination of legal snagging brought protest from some who claimed that the practice helped maintain the ecological balance of the rivers, provided an important form of recreation for a number of people and, perhaps most significantly, encouraged the growth of local economies by promoting the tourist and fishing industries and creating jobs related to these industries. For those reasons, they argued, the snagging of salmon should be allowed to continue at least in those areas where it was most active or concentrated. Thus, the 1984 amendment to the Michigan Sports Fishing Law specifically allowed snagging on certain portions of four rivers.

FISCAL IMPACT

According to the Department of Natural Resources, the bill would have a minimal fiscal impact on State and local government.

ARGUMENTS

Supporting Argument

The problems resulting from snaggers faced by the residents of Newaygo County are typical problems when snagging is permitted. Not only do snaggers trespass on and damage private property, litter public and private property, and disturb the natural habitat of other fish, but their noisy and concentrated activity can make it impossible for traditional sportfishing and commercial fishing to be enjoyed nearby. Since the impact of commercial and traditional sportfishing on local economies can be much more significant than that of snagging, and since the DNR is planning to increase the traditional fishery in the area of the Muskegon River affected by the bill, there are no compelling economic reasons for continuing to allow the practice of snagging. Further, the DNR reports that the numbers of spawning salmon in the Muskegon River have decreased in recent years. By eliminating snagging, the bill

would help to relieve fishing pressure on that river.

Supporting Argument

Snagging should be prohibited altogether; it is neither an ethic nor a sporting way of taking fish and it has no place in State game and fish laws. Snagging is nonselective. Snaggers can injure as many fish as they catch, leaving large numbers to foul the rivers when they die. River bottoms are further polluted by the mass of snarled snag lines, broken hooks and lures, and discarded equipment that piles up in heavily concentrated snagging areas. Snagging plays havoc with the conservation and proper management of other species of fish since they too are caught, injured, or killed by snaggers. Further, the upstream migration of the salmon is impeded by the concentration of snaggers in the few ideal snagging spots, thus interrupting the natural spawning process and seriously affecting the number of salmon available for commercial markets and sportfishers. The negative effects of snagging, however, are not limited to the fouling of the rivers and disruption of fish management programs. There have been numerous complaints that snaggers trespass on and damage private property, litter public and private property, cause erosion of stream and river banks, and disturb the natural habitat of other fish and wildlife. The DNR should be allowed to continue with its long-stated plans to phase out snagging completely.

Response: Snagging has been a very effective, economical, and practical method of handling the problem of surplus salmon in Michigan's rivers. Not only did snagging curb the rapid growth in the salmon population, thereby helping to eliminate the pollution caused by numerous salmon carcasses and restore the rivers' ecological balance, it also bolstered the local economies in snagging areas by attracting tourists and anglers and encouraging the creation of jobs related to the tourist and sportfishing industries. In an area with high unemployment, the recreational activity of snagging is economically critical and should not be eliminated.

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