

Can I use smelt as bait?

Smelt netting on Pokegama Lake and several other waters is a popular spring time activity for some. There is a change in the regulations that anglers need to be aware of. An emergency rule was enacted last fall that prohibits the use of rainbow smelt and cisco (tulibee) as bait, unless they have been preserved. The basis for the new rule is that both cisco and rainbow smelt are carriers of a disease, Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS), which has been found in Lake Superior.

This disease is known to cause large scale fish kills in many popular game species such as bluegill, black crappie, smallmouth bass, muskellunge and walleye. Although Lake Superior is the only Minnesota water known to harbor this disease, the rule was enacted to be proactive and hopefully prevent the spread to inland waters.

It is legal to harvest cisco and rainbow smelt for personal consumption in Lake Superior and Minnesota's inland waters. VHS does not have any impact on humans through direct contact or via fish consumption.

Anglers who harvested and froze cisco and smelt for use as bait can have it preserved and labeled by an authorized permit holder. Freezing alone does not kill the virus. Bait dealers, bait retailers, fish hatcheries, commercial netters, fish packers, fishing guides and aquatic farms may be permitted to preserve cisco and smelt for baitfish. For more information about getting an application to be permitted or who has been permitted, contact the DNR Section of Fisheries at 651-259-5213.

When fishing using preserved cisco or rainbow smelt as bait, anglers must have in their possession the label from the batch of bait being used. The label must contain the bait processor's DNR permit number, the lot number and the date of processing.

More information is available on the DNR webpage:

http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/aboutdnr/laws_treaties/emergency_rules/2010_smeltciscobait.pdf

http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/fish_diseases/vhs.html

We recognize this new rule is a big change to what anglers have done in the past and it may pose an inconvenience. However, the alternative of spreading VHS to new waters and the impact it could have on fish populations would be devastating.