Minnesota Lake Superior Commercial Fishing Regulation Highlights

The Minnesota commercial fishery is highly regulated and operates under limited entry regulation. Limited entry restricts the number of commercial licenses available and also imposes limits on the total and individual gill net footage that may be fished. Limited entry also establishes performance standards that a fisherman must meet to renew an annual license, resulting in a commercial fishery comprised of professionals with a keen interest in the fishery resource.

Lake herring, chubs, lake whitefish, Menominee whitefish, smelt, and suckers may be taken by licensed commercial fishermen. Herring may not be taken during their spawning period in November except by permit.

Lake trout may not be fished commercially except by special assessment permit to gather data for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources’ lake trout rehabilitation program. Lake trout are harvested as part of this DNR assessment program in May and again in September at seven locations along Minnesota’s North Shore. In addition, a small incidental catch of lake trout is permitted for commercial nets that target lake herring. Commercial fishermen must tag all lake trout before they are landed onshore, and no untagged lake trout may be possessed, bought, or sold by licensed commercial fishermen. Untagged lake trout, and all other species not specifically allowed as described above, must be returned to the water immediately.

Commercial gill nets may not be set within one-quarter mile of the shore or on the bottom in water shallower than 240 feet except by special permit. Pound nets may be set only in areas approved by the Commissioner of Natural Resources or an authorized agent. Commercial fishermen and apprentices must possess a valid Minnesota angling license.

No licensed commercial fishermen or any member of his crew or any person on his boat shall have any sport angling equipment while lifting or traveling to and from net sets.

It is unlawful to interfere with a licensed commercial fishing operation.

If You Get Tangled

The downward pull of a snagged cable, your weight in the stern trying to free it, and waves could swamp your boat.

• Downrigger cables are the most likely gear to tangle in nets.
• Release tension on cables or lines and cut; plan to replace the lost equipment.
• Do not enter the water. You can become entangled while the water saps your body heat and strength.
• If the net comes up, keep it away from your propeller.
• If attempting to free tangled equipment, keep the bow of the boat pointed into the wind.

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Product number: F 18
2004

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Minnesota Sea Grant is funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Minnesota.

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Gill nets

Net marking regulations to help recreational boaters recognize and avoid gill nets were developed through discussions among commercial and sport fishermen and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR) and were passed in 1984. The regulations state that gill nets must be marked as follows:

- Ends marked by a fluorescent orange or red buoy with a fluorescent orange or red flag on a 5-foot pole
- Shoreward or westerly end has a white flag below the red or orange flag

Note that only the end buoys are marked with flags but additional buoys often support the nets.

To avoid crossing over the net, go around the buoys, giving them a wide berth. Pass to the west of the shoreward flag or to the east of the lakeward flag.

Floating gill nets

- Used for lake herring
- Most likely to be encountered by North Shore anglers
- Anchored semi-permanently to the bottom, sometimes in as much as 600-900 feet of water
- Net may be 12-150 feet below the surface, 500-1,000 feet long, and suspended at short intervals by floats
- Anchor lines can extend 1,200 feet from each end of the net
- Usually set perpendicular to the shore

Although a boat may be able to cross a floating net, lines and non-flagged buoys could tangle in the propeller. Note that strong currents in Lake Superior often create a significant bow in nets, causing boaters to encounter them sooner (or later) than expected.

Bottom gill nets

- Used for chubs (deepwater ciscoes), whitefish, and lake trout
- Stand like a 6-12 foot high fence on the lake bottom
- Long nets (500-2,000 feet or more) make seeing both end buoys at the same time difficult
- Nets are set in deep water (240 feet or more) so the risk of tangling gear is low
- Special MnDNR assessment nets might be set in shallower water near the shore (usually in September)

You might see commercial fishing nets while angling or boating on Lake Superior. Recognizing nets found in Minnesota waters of Lake Superior and understanding how they are set can help you avoid tangling your equipment. Note that tribal or commercial nets in other waters may be marked or set differently.

Pound nets

- Used mainly in the Duluth-Superior Harbor during the spring smelt run
- The lead (the aquatic version of a farmer’s fence) and a heart-shaped trap funnel fish into the pot
- The lead, which can be 150 feet long, usually stretches from surface to bottom and opens from the trap toward shore or shallower water
- Stakes and anchor lines extend up to 100 feet in all directions and support the nets
- Give the pot and anchor lines a wide berth
- Do not try to pass over pound net leads