

WASHINGTON'S TIGER MUSKIE PROGRAM



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Tiger muskies (a sterile cross between true muskies and northern pike) were first introduced into Washington by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) in 1988. Over the past 21 years they have been planted into 11 different Washington lakes. Currently, approximately 6,500 tiger muskies are planted annually into seven waters totaling 11,700 surface acres. Although the program is small, it provides a unique and very popular trophy fishery for 16,000 Washington anglers (3% of all licensed anglers). It also represents an estimated 56,000 angler-days per year (~3.5 days/angler/year) of recreation with an associated economic value of \$7,560,000 per year to the state's economy (\$135/angler day). The average annual cost for the program to WDFW is about \$70,000.

Washington receives "eyed eggs" (fertilized and partially developed) from Minnesota DNR in May of each year. The eggs are hatched and reared for one year at the Ringold/Meseberg Hatchery, which is about 20 miles north of the Tri-Cities area on the Columbia River. They are then released in May-June at one year of age and a minimum length of 12 inches. As stated earlier, the yearling tiger muskies are planted into seven lakes across the state: Mayfield Lake (Lewis Co.), Merwin Reservoir (Cowlitz Co.), Lake Tapps (Pierce Co.), Evergreen Reservoir (Grant Co.), Silver Lake (Spokane Co.), Newman Lake (Spokane Co.), and Curlew Lake (Ferry Co.).

Because tiger muskies are an apex predator and consume only other fish, they grow rapidly and can attain a very large size. The current world record weight is 51 pounds and the current Washington State record is 32 pounds. The minimum legal length limit in Washington was recently increased from 36 to 50 inches so any fish over 50 inches would likely represent a new state record. The new 50 inch minimum size though, virtually creates a catch-and-release fishery, which is embraced and practiced by almost all muskie anglers.

Diet studies in five Washington waters have shown that tiger muskie's foraging preference is round-bodied, "soft-rayed", non-salmonid fish. For example, a 2002 diet study in Mayfield Reservoir showed the tiger muskie's diet (n = 61) was comprised of (percent by number) northern pikeminnow (49%), largescale suckers (29%), rainbow trout (8%), coho salmon (6%), other species (8%). Salmonids available in the reservoir include rainbow trout, coho, fall Chinook, steelhead and searun cutthroat trout. Study results from Curlew Lake, Silver Lake and Merwin Reservoir show similar results.

The future of Washington's tiger muskie fishery is very secure and the number of anglers dedicated to this highly revered fish continue to grow. For anyone wishing to try tiger angling for the first time, there is a myriad of resources on the internet. Another option is to contact their local tackle store, or one of the three fishing clubs dedicated to tiger muskies in Washington: Muskies, Inc. Chapter #57 in Federal way, Muskies, Inc. Chapter #60 in Spokane or Cascade Musky Association, Puyallup.

