

MEETING NOTES

**ALABAMA POWER COMPANY
MARTIN RELICENSING
STRIPED BASS FOCUS GROUP**

**WILLOW POINT COUNTRY CLUB
JANUARY 08, 2009**

ATTENDEES:

Name	Organization	Name	Organization
Jeff Leep	Angler	Wes Wood	Angler
Cecil Williams	Angler	Ben Walker	Angler
Jim Paramore	Angler	Pat Vinzant	Angler
Greg Vinson	Angler		

Jim Crew	APC	Jim Lochamy	APC
Angie Anderegg	APC		
Nick Nichols	ADCNR	Chris Greene	ADCNR
Steve Sammons	Auburn University	Aaron Kern	Auburn University
Henry Mealing	Kleinschmidt	Dave Anderson	Kleinschmidt
Amanda Fleming	Kleinschmidt		

ACTION ITEMS:

- Dr. Steve Sammons from Auburn University will be contacting interested anglers regarding the fish tagging study

MEETING NOTES:

These notes summarize the major discussion items and are not intended to be a transcript or analysis of the meeting.

The meeting began with a welcome from Jim Crew, Alabama Power Company (Alabama Power), and introductions of the attendees. The meeting purpose is to gather information from striped bass anglers that regularly fish on Lake Martin.

Henry Mealing, Kleinschmidt Associates (Kleinschmidt), facilitated the Striped Bass discussion. In the first part of the discussion, the seven anglers answered 15 scripted questions related to their opinions and observations on the striped bass fishery on Lake Martin. In the next part of the discussion open questions were allowed from all the meeting participants.

Question One: On a scale of 1 to 5 with “5” being “excellent” and “1” being “poor”, please rate your striped bass fishing experience on Lake Martin during the last three years. Answers ranged from two to five. Some anglers thought the difference might be related to how often they

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fished or the location they usually fished. Most thought that the fishery was basically consistent over the last three years; however, many thought that the striped bass caught during recent years seem to be getting larger on average.

Question Two: What do you consider a “large” striped bass for Lake Martin? Answers ranged from 12 to 40 lbs. Anglers suggested that the size of the fish varies based on several factors:

- location of fishing on the lake – bigger fish in upstream areas,
- size has increased since hybrids striped bass stocking was discontinued on the lake,
- size has increased with the addition of yellow perch to the lake (food for the fish), and
- size varies with improved fishing methods over last several years.

Question Three: For purposes of this question, the facilitator has defined a “large” striped bass as a striped bass over 15 lbs. Have you caught large (>15 lbs) striped bass in Lake Martin? All the participants agreed they had. The anglers remarked that February, March, and April were the best times of year to catch large striped bass on the upper portions of the lake. On the lower portion of the lake July, August, September, and October seemed to be the most opportune time to catch a large striped bass. The pattern of the fish in the lake seems fairly predictable.

Question Four: If YES, have you caught large striped bass during the last 5 years? During the last 3 years? All anglers agreed they have caught a striped bass (>15 lbs) in the last five years. Most (four) said they have caught a striped bass (>15 lbs) in the last three years.

Question Five: Have you observed fishermen culling medium to large fish once they reach their limit – especially larger fish (10-15 lbs and over)? Four anglers said they have observed other fishermen culling medium to large fish. Other anglers remarked that catch and release of large striped bass (>12 lbs in this case), especially in the summer months, often killed the fish. The anglers were concerned about the best methods of catch and release, if air bladder venting and running water through the fish gills are effective, or if the only effective method of prevention is to not catch and release fish. These issues were addressed by the biologists in the second part of the focus group discussion.

Question Six: If so, how often? Responses to this question included: no response, often, 2-3 times per year, 10-15 times per year, and 20 times.

Question Seven: How often do anglers limit out or are they more likely to utilize catch and release? Anglers stated that if they did not use catch and release, then they were all likely to limit out on most trips. The daily creel limit on Lake Martin is two striped bass over 16 inches in total length. On some reservoirs, if you put a fish in a boat it counts toward your creel limit, however,

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this is not the case on Lake Martin. Some of the anglers suggested that this might be a helpful way to improve the fishery on Lake Martin.

Question Eight: Where on Lake Martin do you typically locate striped bass during the late summer? The angler's responses included: Chimney Rock, Dixie Sailing Club, mouth of Blue Creek, Kowaliga Bridge, lower end of the lake, middle part of the dam area, Wares Slough, and Cherokee Slough. Henry also asked them to mark the locations where they find fish on the lower end of the lake during the summer on a Lake Martin map. The anglers suggested that certain features such as currents and humps make these spots superior. (Dave and Amanda to develop a map with these locations marked on it.)

Question Nine: Have you ever observed a die-off of striped bass on Lake Martin? Only three anglers indicated that they observed actual die offs. Many indicated that they had observed extreme fish stress during the late summer. Some hypothesized the stress may result from the fish seeking thermal refuge and not having enough food in the thermal refuge zone. The anglers agreed that the fish seem most stressed when Alabama Power draws more water from the dam, especially around the month of September. One angler asked if there could be die offs where the fish never come to the surface. Another angler suggested the die offs were less frequent now that the Gulf Strain was being stocked exclusively (rather than the Atlantic Strain hybrid).

Question 10-13 were used to follow up on Question 9.

Question 10: When did the die off occur? One angler described a fish kill involving thousands of fish near Dixie Sailing Club around September three or four years ago, another angler described a fish kill in September 2001 around the same part of the lake, and another angler described some die offs in 2002 and 2003 near Anchor Bay and Dixie Sailing Club.

Question 11: How many fish did you observe and what was the general size of fish? Three anglers reported on observed die offs. One angler described around 1500 to 2000 dead fish (most >6 lbs), another angler described an event with about 15 dead fish (all about 24-40 inches), and a final angler described a series of die offs usually about four or five fish (most >10 lbs).

Question 12: Did you report the die off to APC and/or ADCNR? Only one angler reported a die off.

Question 13: If YES, did you report to APC and/or ADCNR? The die off was reported to Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM).

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Question 14: Do you have specific suggestions for improving the striped bass fishing experience on Lake Martin? Suggestions included:

- require barbless hooks for striped bass fishing,
- educate anglers on proper handling practices,
- find a way to maintain a cold water refuge, less water releases (from the dam) from June to September, and
- increase the creel limit to six fish per day.

Question 15: Would you be interested and available to participate in any striped bass studies on Lake Martin during 2009? All of the anglers agreed they would be interested and available.

For a concise table of all questionnaire results, see attached spreadsheet.

The next part of the discussion was open to the entire group. Henry asked the group about the bait they typically use for fishing. The anglers said it included gizzard and threadfin shad, yellow perch, and red horse suckers. Yellow perch is becoming a more common part of the striped bass diet since the early 1990s. Yellow perch are not native to Alabama, but are now present in waters all over the state. An increase of yellow perch in the diet may be a result of both species sharing a similar thermal preference. Another question was how fishing techniques change throughout the year. In the warm weather more downrigger fishing occurs and none of the anglers fished for stripers at night. Some anglers called Lake Martin “one of the best kept secrets of the south” as far as the striped bass fishery is concerned. Finally, the ADCNR talked about the best methods of catch and release. The high surface water temperatures on the lake make catch and release difficult. It is hard to keep big fish alive when they are caught from 30 to 70 feet deep and brought to the surface. Studies from other southeastern reservoirs have shown that even if the fish swim away they may die later. Air bladder venting has not been proven effective for increasing survival of catch and release. Dr. Steve Sammons said that this might be something that can be incorporated into the study Auburn University will conduct on Lake Martin this summer.

At this point Dr. Sammons gave a brief explanation of the study he will be conducting during 2009. He acknowledged that the fish kills on Lake Martin seem very random and this makes it more difficult to study. Auburn will tag 30 big striped bass and track their movements in the lake. They will also collect dissolved oxygen, temperature, and depth preferences for these fish for at least one year. Dr. Sammons discussed the typical striped bass behavior, where in unfavorable conditions the fish movements are restricted and as a result their diets are limited. Dr. Sammons is also collecting water quality profiles (maybe as often as every two weeks) during the year. They will try to review historic water quality data and try to determine what caused some of the historic fish kills.

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The final part of the study will be the hooking mortality study. The most difficult part of a hooking mortality study is usually not holding the fish over the normal “catch time”. In this study, the fish will be tagged with a mortality tag using absorbable sutures that will naturally dissolve in seven to 10 days, at which point the tag will float to the surface of the lake. These new tags take only about 30 seconds to place on the fish. The anglers participating in the study will help Dr. Sammons catch the fish and place the tags on them, as well as collecting tags that float to the surface.

At this time there will be no stomach analysis on the fish. This may be a study for the future, as the yellow perch issue becomes more widespread.

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Attachment A



Agenda

Striped Bass Focus Group

January 8, 2009

Willow Point Country Club

6:30 PM – 8:30 PM

Dinner to precede meeting at 5:30 PM

Meeting Purpose: APC wants your input to provide more diverse background information on the Lake Martin striped bass fishery and to discuss the upcoming striped bass tagging studies to be conducted on Lake Martin in 2009.

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|---------|--|
| 5:30 PM | Dinner (Willow Point Country Club) |
| 6:30 PM | Introductions, Review Meeting Purpose, and Agenda (John Grogan, Alabama Power Company) |
| 6:45 PM | Striped Bass Focus Group Questions to Participants (Kleinschmidt Associates) |
| 8:15 PM | Presentation of Striped Bass Tagging Studies for 2009 (Steve Sammons, Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures, Auburn University) |
| 8:30 PM | Adjourn |

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**Attachment B
Lake Martin Striped Bass Focus Group
Participant Questions**

Thank you for participating in the Lake Martin Striped Bass Focus Group. Your responses to the questions asked by the facilitator will be used to develop and provide background information on the Lake Martin striped bass fishery, which may be used as part of the Martin Relicensing process. The information you provide may be critical in evaluating Lake Martin's current and future management of striped bass.

Your facilitator for this evening will lead you through the questions listed below. The facilitator will ask you to respond verbally but you are also encouraged to write your responses on this questionnaire. When you respond verbally or in writing, please provide as much specificity as possible. The facilitator will collect each questionnaire at the end of the focus group.

Thank you again for your participation and we look forward to your responses!

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS:

- 1) On a scale of 1 to 5 with "5" being "excellent" and "1" being "poor", please rate your striped bass fishing experience on Lake Martin during the last three years. Place your rating on the question sheet provided to you. **(please circle one number)**

1 (poor) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (excellent)

- 2) What do you consider a "large" striped bass for Lake Martin? **(please indicate the size fish you consider to be "large" in Lake Martin)**
- 3) For purposes of this question, the facilitator has defined a "large" striped bass as a striped bass over 15 lbs. Have you caught large (<15 lbs) striped bass in Lake Martin? **(please circle YES or NO)**

YES (If YES, Go to Q4)

NO (if NO, Go to Q5)

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- 4) If YES, have you caught large striped bass during the last 5 years? During the last 3 years?
(please circle YES or NO for each of the Years indicated)

LAST 5 YEARS

LAST 3 YEARS

YES NO

YES NO

- 5) Have you observed fishermen culling medium to large fish once they reach their limit – especially larger fish (10-15 lbs and over)? (please circle YES or NO)

YES (If YES, Go to Q6)

NO (If NO, Go to Q7)

- 6) If so, how often? (please indicate a number)

- 7) How often do anglers limit out or are they more likely to utilize catch and release? (please fill in your response in the space provided)

- 8) Where on Lake Martin do you typically locate striped bass during the late summer? (please describe in detail a location or locations)

- 9) Have you ever observed a die-off of striped bass on Lake Martin? (please circle YES or NO)

YES (if YES, Go to Q10)

NO (if NO, Go to Q14)

- 10) When did the die off occur? (please indicate a specific location (s) in the space provided)

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11) How many fish did you observe and what was the general size of fish? **(please indicate the number of fish and general size (in inches) for each die off you have observed in the space provided)**

12) Did you report the die off to APC and/or ADCNR? **(please circle YES or NO)**

YES

NO

13) If **YES**, did you report to APC and/or ADCNR? **(please circle one or both if applicable)**

APC

ADCNR

14) Do you have specific suggestions for improving the striped bass fishing experience on Lake Martin? **(please record any suggestions in the space provided)**

15) Would you be interested and available to participate in any striped bass studies on Lake Martin during 2009? **(please circle YES or NO)**

YES (if YES, please include full contact information below) **NO**