



## Pygmy Whitefish (*Prosopium coulterii*) Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations

Information summary and survey for the consultations on potentially adding Pygmy Whitefish to the List of Aquatic Species at Risk as Threatened – **Please provide input by September 26, 2022**

### Consultations

Let your opinion be heard

As part of the consultation process, the Government of Canada would like to hear your opinion, comments, and suggestions regarding the possible ecological, cultural, and economic impacts of listing or not listing the **Pygmy Whitefish (*Prosopium coulterii*)** Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations (Designatable Unit (DU) 5) as **Threatened** under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

### Adding a species to the List of Wildlife Species at Risk

The process of listing a species under SARA consists of several steps including:

1. status assessment by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC)
2. public consultations to gather the opinions of Canadians
3. Government of Canada decision on whether or not to add a species to the List of Wildlife Species at Risk

### About the Pygmy Whitefish

The Pygmy Whitefish is a member of the *Salmonidae* family and is the smallest species within the subfamily *Coregoninae* (whitefishes) (Figure 1). In Ontario (Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations) the species can exceed 15 cm but is more commonly observed with an average length in the range of 9 to 11 cm. The maximum known age is 9 years. Like many small-bodied fishes, the Pygmy Whitefish plays a role as a forage fish for larger-bodied predatory fishes.

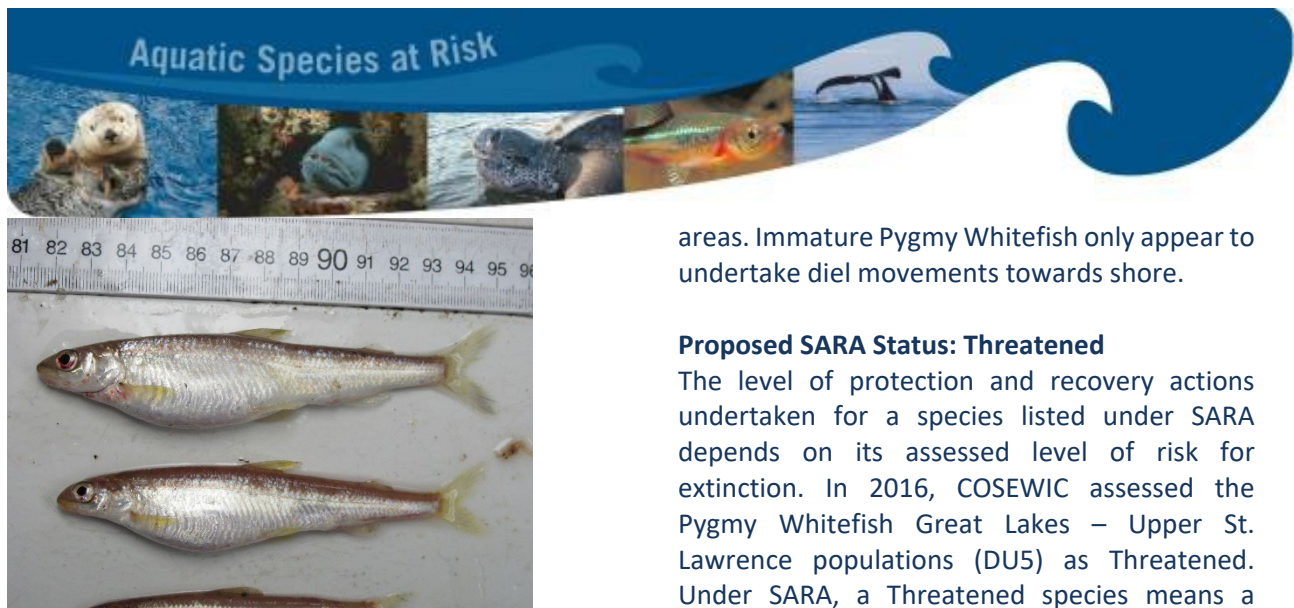
### Distribution

The Pygmy Whitefish may have the most discontinuous range of any freshwater fish in North America. In Canada, it can be found in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario.

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**Figure 1. Pygmy Whitefish.** ©Owen Gorman, United States Geological Survey.

Canadian Pygmy Whitefish populations have been divided into 7 designatable units (DUs). Currently, the Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations (DU5) are being considered for listing under SARA; other DUs of Pygmy Whitefish are being considered separately. Within DU5, Pygmy Whitefish are found entirely within Lake Superior (Figure 2).

The Pygmy Whitefish is a bottom-oriented species that occupies deep-water habitat in Lake Superior where it feeds on a variety of benthic invertebrates and fish eggs. Spawning has not been observed in Lake Superior and relatively little is known about their dispersal and movement in the lake. Unlike other populations, Pygmy Whitefish in Lake Superior do not appear to migrate long distances within tributary streams. They may exhibit a mixture of vertical migration (diel movement) in the water column throughout the day, which may help reduce predation from Lake Trout and/or daily migrations between shallow and deep benthic

areas. Immature Pygmy Whitefish only appear to undertake diel movements towards shore.

**Proposed SARA Status: Threatened**

The level of protection and recovery actions undertaken for a species listed under SARA depends on its assessed level of risk for extinction. In 2016, COSEWIC assessed the Pygmy Whitefish Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations (DU5) as Threatened. Under SARA, a Threatened species means a wildlife species that is likely to become an Endangered species if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

**Why is Pygmy Whitefish at risk?**

Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations of the Pygmy Whitefish have experienced dramatic declines in abundance over the last several decades, with a high likelihood that a decline of greater than 30% has occurred since 2003. Invasive species, pollution, climate change and the recovery of the native predatory Lake Trout may threaten or limit recovery.

**If a species is listed under the SARA**

If the Pygmy Whitefish (Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations) is listed as Threatened, the prohibitions under SARA would immediately come into effect. It would be illegal to kill, harm, harass, capture, take, possess, collect, buy, sell or trade Pygmy Whitefish (Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations). Critical habitat (the habitat necessary for the survival and recovery of Pygmy Whitefish: Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations) would need to be identified, to the extent possible, in a recovery



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strategy or action plan and protected from destruction. If listed, Fisheries and Oceans Canada will engage with interested parties on the development of a recovery strategy and action plan. A recovery strategy would need to be prepared within 2 years of listing.

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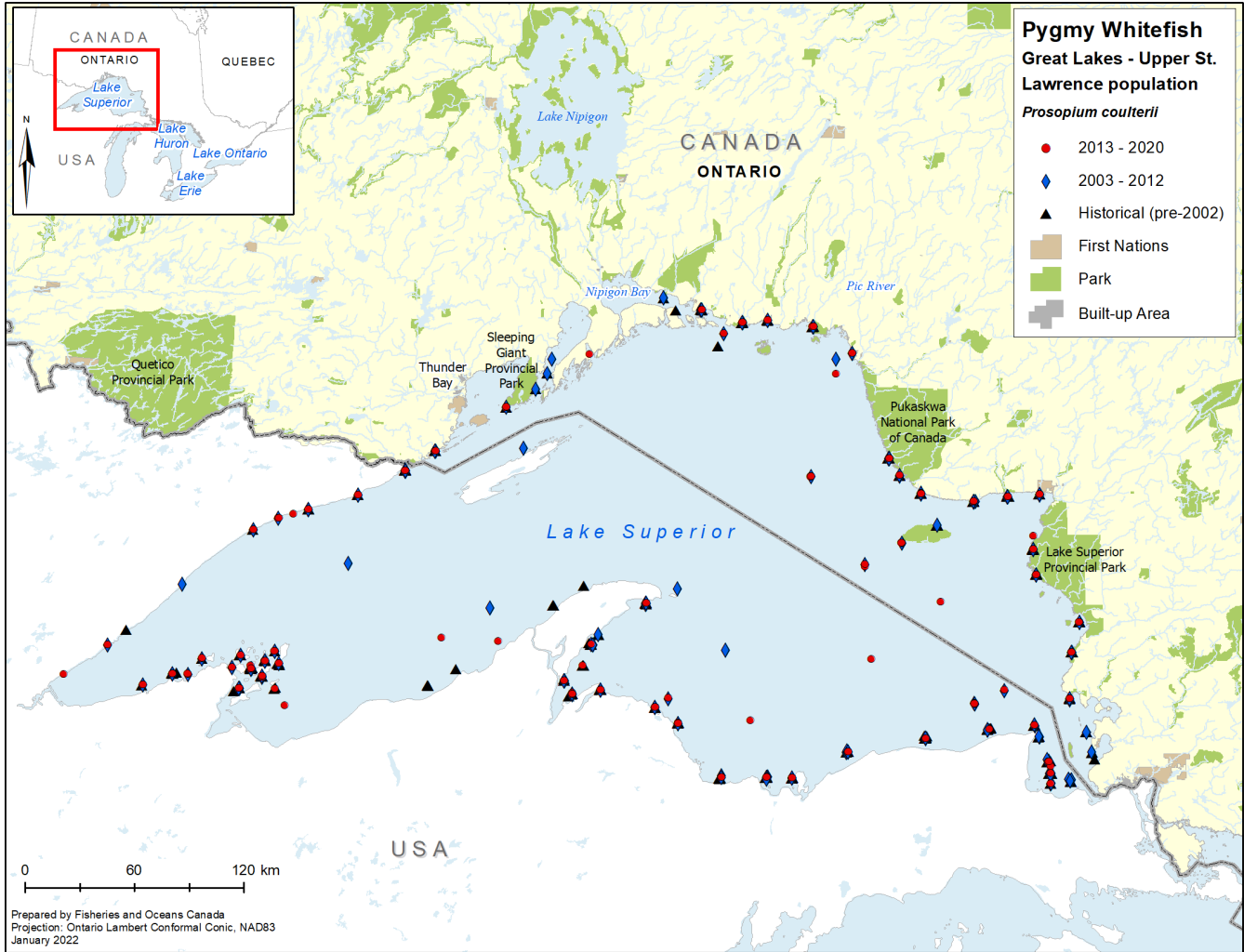


Figure 2. Distribution of the Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence Pygmy Whitefish populations



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We would like to hear your opinion, comments, and suggestions regarding the possible ecological, cultural, and economic impacts of listing or not listing Pygmy Whitefish (Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations) to the List of Wildlife Species at Risk (Schedule 1) under SARA as Threatened. Your comments are important.

Please fill out the survey: we want to hear from you.

Thank you for completing this survey.

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Before completing this survey, you may wish to review the following background information found at the links below:

- [COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Pygmy Whitefish \*Prosopium coulterii\*, Southwestern Yukon Beringian populations, Yukon River populations, Pacific populations, Western Arctic populations, Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations, Waterton Lake populations and Saskatchewan - Nelson Rivers populations in Canada \(2016\)](#)
- [Recovery Potential Assessment of Pygmy Whitefish \(\*Prosopium coulterii\*\), Great Lakes – Upper St. Lawrence populations \(DU5\) \(2021\)](#)
- Other information can be found on the [Species at Risk Public Registry](#).

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