AMERICAN FISHERIES SOCIETY
MONTANA CHAPTER

SENATE FISH AND GAME
EXHIBIT NO. 8
DATE Jan. 22, 2009
BILL NO. SB 15

Senate Fish and Game Committee
2009 Montana Legislature
Helena, Montana

January 16, 2009

RE: Senate Bill 15 – "An Act Defining Walleye as a Native Species in Montana ..."

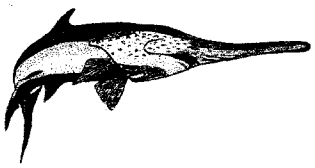
Dear Senators Barkus, Brenden, Balyeat, Barrett, Gallus, Jent, Schmidt, Shockley, and Topila.

On behalf of the more than 350 members of the Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (MCAFS) I appreciate the opportunity to voice our **opposition to Senate Bill 15** (SB 15) whose primary purpose is to define the walleye (*Sander vitreus*) as a Montana native fish.

The American Fisheries Society (AFS), founded in 1870, is the oldest and largest professional society representing fisheries scientists. Our mission is to improve the conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and promoting the development of fisheries professionals. AFS promotes scientific research and enlightened management of resources for optimum use and enjoyment by the public. We also encourage a comprehensive education for fisheries scientists and continuing on-the-job training. The AFS publishes some of the world's leading fisheries research journals and organizes scientific meetings where new results are reported and discussed. The Montana Chapter of the AFS was formed in 1967 and is one of 53 chapters of the American Fisheries Society. Our membership is comprised of fisheries professionals affiliated with state and federal agencies, universities, and private industry, all dedicated to preserving and enhancing the fisheries resources of Montana. Issues that may affect our state's native fishes, their management and conservation, and their perception and use by the public, such as Senate Bill 15 does, are very important too us.

MCAFS believes that delineation or definition of a species' native range should be based on the best scientific evidence and not simply by legislative action requested by a resource user group. Action such as proposed by SB 15 should be taken only after careful consideration of the available information by the scientific community and other professionals responsible for the management and conservation of native species. The proponents of SB 15 justify the proposed change by reasoning that because walleye are native to North Dakota and the two states are connected via the Missouri River, walleye must be native to Montana. This fails consider other factors that might affect or define a native range, including changes in geology, water quality, presence of congeners, barriers to movement, and suitable habitat, among other things.

North Dakota considers walleye native to portions of the Red River drainage in the eastern part of the state – a basin that flows north to Hudson Bay. However, there is much unresolved debate regarding the historic status of walleye in the Missouri River system (see Galat et al. 2005) because of the widespread, early stocking of the species before its native range was fully defined, as well as misidentification with sauger (*Sander canadensis*) – a congener that is native to Montana. One assessment (e.g., Hoagstrom and Berry 2006) suggests walleye may have moved into and up the Missouri system as far as North Dakota in the post glacial period, but this hypothesis is not supported by any fossil record, historical account (e.g., early journals) or museum specimen. Others (e.g., Tyus 2002, Bailey and Allum 1962) counter that if walleye were ever native to the Missouri River, it was in the lower portions of the system well below North Dakota. The bottom line is that there exists no evidence, even anecdotal, that walleye were established in Montana prior to initial human stocking in



the state. It is our opinion, based on the evidence, that designating the walleye as native to Montana would be inappropriate at this time.

Because of the insufficient scientific basis for this proposed change, MCAFS has other concerns regarding SB 15. Native designation may ultimately require the MT Dept. of Fish Wildlife and Parks to unnecessarily shift time and resources to this species, to the detriment of other native species. Native recognition may cause good intentioned, but non-sanctioned stocking by a public with the perception that they are helping a native - with potential catastrophic consequences for other native fishes, such as trouts and non-game species. Successfully designating walleye as native may embolden other groups to attempt similar recognition for other species, even with contrary scientific evidence.

MCAFS is satisfied with the current designation for walleye and believes current management efforts by MT Fish Wildlife and Parks on behalf of the species are appropriate and adequate.

We hope you will oppose SB 15.

With warmest regards,

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Literature Cited.

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