

Agency to float Pend Oreille fishery plan

Fish and Game wants to protect salmon by harvesting predatory fish

By James Hagengruber
Staff writer

Biologists think they might know how to restore legendary fishing to Lake Pend Oreille. But not even the best scientific plan has a chance unless it's supported by the many anglers who fish Idaho's largest lake, said Ned Horner, regional fisheries manager for the state's Fish and Game Department.

The state hopes to convince Lake Pend Oreille anglers and local residents that more lake trout need to be caught and killed. Horner said focusing on the exotic predatory fish is the only hope for salvaging the rest of the big lake's fishery.

Meeting

What: The latest research on Lake Pend Oreille's predator fish population will be discussed at a public meeting in Sandpoint. The public is also invited to provide input on ideas for restoring the lake's fishery.

When: Saturday from 8 a.m. to noon

Where: Sandpoint Community Center, 204 S. First Ave.

On Saturday, the agency will host a public meeting in Sandpoint to explain the need for a boosted lake trout harvest, including the potential for resurrecting a larger-scale commercial fishery or wider

use of trap nets. The morning meeting will feature the latest findings on predator population research in the lake.

"We're trying to get the public involved. There's a lot at stake here," Horner said. "We're trying something different. We're trying to prevent a fishery from collapsing."

Since 2000, the Fish and Game Department has been trying to convince anglers to harvest and eat more lake and rainbow trout from the lake. But many who doubt the validity of the state's population estimates resist the program. During a fall fishing derby, about 70 percent of the fish caught were released back into the lake — the highest release rate since 2000 when the state relaxed regulations and began

Fishing: More sampling set for February

Continued from B1

funding fishing derbies to make a dent in rainbow and lake trout populations.

"Biologically, those regulations we implemented should have worked. Socially, those regulations were not accepted," Horner said. "The anglers need to take an active role in solving this problem before it's too late, or we're going to lose this fishery."

Lake and rainbow trout have been munching their way through Lake Pend Oreille's kokanee salmon population. Recent population estimates say the predators are winning the fight. This fall, trap nets set in the lake caught about 10,700 lake trout longer than 20 inches — a 50 percent boost since a similar survey in 2003. More sample netting will take place beginning in February to double-check the population estimate, Horner said. The plans will be discussed in greater detail Saturday.

Horner said he thinks little time is left before the kokanee population crashes. In 2003, the total sport fishery on the lake contributed an estimated \$17.8 million to the local economy, according to a Fish and Game estimate. "If we had that kokanee fishery opened, it would probably be close to double that," Horner said.

Flathead and Priest lakes have already experienced collapses in kokanee populations and subsequent drops in anglers who fish the lakes, Horner said.

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