

Drastic Steps Needed to Save Kokanee

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Sandpoint—It's going to take drastic measures to save the last of the Lake Pend Oreille kokanee from being eaten by bigger fish.

The population of lake trout over 20 inches, increased by 50 percent—to 10,000 from 6,400—in two years, Ned Horner told 86 people attending a community meeting Saturday in Sandpoint. Lake trout prefer to eat kokanee over other prey.

He said 2005 and 2003 population estimates using live trap nets weren't effective in helping to determine how many lake trout under 20 inches are in Pend Oreille.

"We've got a lot more lake trout waiting in the wings, but we don't have a good feel for how many are out there," he said.

Fish and Game will begin using gill nets next month in an effort to get better population estimates of the lake trout and lake whitefish populations.

Whitefish are the most numerous fish in Lake Pend Oreille. Fish and Game is trying to determine their significance to other fish.

Kevin Sawyer, a vocal opponent of netting, objected.

"I was told four years ago, that they weren't going to use gill nets," Sawyer said.

Though the gill nets would target lake trout and whitefish, they are nondiscriminatory in what they kill, including bull trout, he said. Bull trout are federally protected as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

Fish and Game is requesting a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to allow incidental killing of up to 150 bull trout in the gill net program. About half of all fish caught in the gill nets will die.

Horner said living bull trout, rainbow trout and cutthroat trout will be released. Lake trout and whitefish will be killed and donated to local food banks.

Sawyer said IDFG should concentrate more on reducing rainbow trout because they eat the most kokanee.

"Rainbows eat twice as many pounds of kokanee as lake trout," said Chip Corsi, supervisor for Fish and Game's Panhandle Region. "We can't solve this just on the backs of lake trout or rainbow. We've got to get onto both of them."

Fish and Game is forming a new stakeholders group to keep an ear on public sentiment. But in a time that requires action, the agency may have to make some unpopular decisions to remove more predators.

"Fisherman are part of the solution, but it's going to take more drastic measures. Maybe gill nets, maybe trap nets—maybe both," Corsi said.

The current kokanee population can produce about 130 tons of new kokanee this year, said Melo Maiolie, fisheries biologist for Fish and Game.

But estimated populations of rainbow trout and lake trout will eat more than 162 tons this year. Native bull trout will eat another six tons.

"They are taking all of the interest out of the bank and reducing the principal," Maiolie said. "We have to reduce predation by more than 50 tons to get even a modest increase in kokanee."

Tony McDermott, Fish and Game Commissioner from Sagle, said his highest priority is Lake Pend Oreille fisheries.

"This is the most important thing we're going to work on the next four years," he said. "We've got to go after everything that eats kokanee. If we don't, we're going to fail."

Kokanee are important ecologically and economically, Corsi said.

Pend Oreille kokanee once provided the most popular fishery in the state. Angler harvest of kokanee peaked at 1.3 million in 1953.