

Fish & Game seeking elevated lake level

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But water might be needed for chum salmon

Sandpoint—Lake Pend Oreille's water level is dropping, but it's still not clear what level it will be maintained at this winter.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the Albeni Falls Dam, has been releasing water out of the lake at a rate of about a tenth of a foot a day, but there is no word on what the winter pool will be.

"We don't have a target elevation for the system," said Patricia Graesser, spokeswoman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game is requesting an elevated winter pool level of 2,055 feet above sea-level in order to capitalize on modest gains in kokanee spawners. Some 100,000 female kokanee are expected to spawn in the lake this winter, creating a need for ample shoreline habitat.

"The bottom line is that we've got more kokanee than the habitat can support if the lake is down at 2,051," said Chip Corsi, Fish and Game's supervisor for the Panhandle region. "There's just so much more habitat available with the lake up."

But there's a distinct chance the National Marine Fisheries Service might seek additional water this winter to aid the chum salmon below Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. The chum salmon are listed as a threatened species, and water from the Pend Oreille helps keep water flowing on the lower Columbia.

The Corps is currently evaluating how much the flows from Lake Pend Oreille would aid chum salmon, according to Melo Maiolie, a principal fisheries research biologist with Fish and Game.

Fish and Game is also conducting a study which recommends keeping the lake up for three years then dropping it for the fourth year. There are no guarantees, however, the winter pool will be managed in such a way.

"The fact that we're still even having these discussions means that it's not foregone conclusion," Corsi said.

If a higher pool is maintained this winter, it would be the second year in the three-up/one-down cycle. Fish and Game opted not to fight for an elevated level two years ago because the number of kokanee spawners was so depressed the added habitat would have made little difference.

Corsi said Fish and Game data suggest if there are less than 70,000 spawners, they can get by with a lower winter pool.

"But once you get above 70,000 females, then you're likely to see a substantial decline in egg-to-fry survival because space is then limited at that point," said Corsi, who hopes the good faith cooperation with downstream interests two years ago will be reciprocated.

Maiolie adds that the health of kokanee is linked to the health of Lake Pend Oreille bull trout, which feed on kokanee, a landlocked form of salmon.