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Ban on kokanee harvest continues

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Fish and Game meeting is scheduled for Monday

SANDPOINT -- The ban on harvesting Lake Pend Oreille kokanee will remain in effect during the 2006-2007 fishing season.

With state wildlife officials and anglers working to strengthen the lake's kokanee population, some believed the Idaho Department of Fish and Game would lift the moratorium.

"We were hoping to, but unfortunately it looks like predation is still a big issue," said Ned Horner, Fish and Game's Panhandle fisheries manager.

The kokanee dilemma, and a full slate of other fishing issues, will be discussed during a meeting at the Sandpoint Community Hall on Monday.

The meeting, which lasts from 6-9 p.m., will cover proposed changes to fishing regulations in the Panhandle and throughout the state, plus update anglers on the latest fishery news involving Lake Pend Oreille.

Here are some of the topics set for discussion:

Pend Oreille lake trout

Montana's Flathead Lake does not appear to be the culprit for Lake Pend Oreille's overabundance of lake trout, according to research data.

"It looks like lake trout are not coming down from Flathead in significant numbers. The lake trout increase in Pend Oreille is pretty much a homegrown problem," Horner said.

Pend Oreille saw a sharp increase in lake trout in the 1990s, leading to speculation the fish were migrating from Flathead, but Horner said "lake of origin" study data suggest this was not the case.

Regional regulation proposals

Fish and Game plans to list the Panhandle's Antelope and Bull Moose lakes as "family fishing waters" in the 2006-07 regulations. The lakes would be stocked with rainbow trout, essentially making them spots where families and budding anglers can catch fish without too much trouble. The harvest limit would be six fish of any size.

Antelope Lake is located east of Clark Fork. Bull Moose Lake is on the east side of Priest Lake, near Two Mouth Creek.

The department also plans to close the headwaters of the East Fork River to fishing to protect a unique population of bull trout.

"Bull trout spend June through October in those headwater areas. It's a very limited population of 30-50 adults," said Horner.

Those bull trout hold the distinction of being the only known outlet spawners in the region, said Horner. The fish spawn in the East Fork, then commute down the Priest and Pend Oreille rivers, eventually coming to Lake Pend Oreille to spend their adulthood.

The rule change would affect about one-third of the drainage, although Horner said there are plenty of rainbow and cutthroat trout to be had below the closure area.

Statewide regulation proposals

There are three proposed changes to Idaho's fishing rules. One would allow anglers with a two-pole validation to use up to 10 tip-ups or poles while fishing through winter ice. The current limit is five.

Fish and Game also proposes to allow brook trout fishing tournaments in the Panhandle in 2006-07.

Finally, the state wants to abolish harvest limits on walleye and northern pike, both of which were illegally introduced in Idaho. Horner said people continue to practice "bucket biology" by importing the fish to Idaho waters.

"People that are from different parts of the country want to see their favorite fish here so they can catch them and move them around," he said.

The department wants to send the message that if people continue to introduce them, the state will no longer protect them.

Illegal introduction of walleye has created what appears to be a reproducing population in Montana's Noxon Reservoir, which is upstream from Lake Pend Oreille.

Walleye are of particular concern in the Pend Oreille because they are known to haunt the mouths of tributaries, where they pick could easily pick off bull, rainbow and cutthroat trout.

"They'll just hammer 'em. They could be real hard on native and important sport fisheries as far as predation goes," said Horner, who shudders at the thought of another predator taking up residence in Pend Oreille.