

Incentives boosted for laker harvest

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SANDPOINT -- The Idaho Department of Fish and Game is upping the ante again for lake trout anglers in a bid to help restore Lake Pend Oreille's struggling kokanee population.

The state is committing \$30,000 in additional prize money for lake trout anglers during the Lake Pend Oreille Idaho Club's K&K Derby this spring. Fish and Game estimates about half of the annual angling effort on Pend Oreille occurs during the nine-day spring derby and LPOIC has the infrastructure to help determine the influence the added incentives can have on lake trout harvest.

Fish and Game contends lake trout, which feed on kokanee, are holding back attempts to rebuild Lake Pend Oreille's flagging kokanee population.

The \$30,000 comes from \$70,000 that was set aside through a settlement agreement between the federal government and Avista Utilities for relicensing the Cabinet Gorge and Noxon Rapids dams on the Clark Fork River, which flows into Lake Pend Oreille.

Fish and Game is also putting up \$1,000 in prize money to encourage the harvest of native pikeminnow during the spring derby.

There are competing views about the roll pikeminnow play in the Pend Oreille. They are notorious for consuming anadromous smolts near the dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers and some here believe they are a factor in the decline of kokanee.

"We do not believe the pikeminnow are the cause of the kokanee decline," said Ned Horner, fisheries manager for Fish and Game's Panhandle region.

Nevertheless, Fish and Game will be evaluating their abundance and eating habits. Local angling activist Lloyd Campbell has tagged more than 600 pikeminnow and Fish and Game will examine the ratio of tagged and untagged fish to estimate population abundance. Stomach contents will also be scrutinized to evaluate pikeminnow eating habits.

"Those are the things that have already been committed and approved. The question is 'What do we do with the remaining \$40,000?'" Horner said, referring to the balance of the relicensing funds.

One idea that has significant support among local anglers is a lake trout-only derby that could last as long as a month, Horner said. Another is launching an education campaign designed to teach people how to become more effective lake trout anglers. Horner said this could be accomplished through clinics, seminars and perhaps even a how-to video.

Creating better access to Lake Pend Oreille when the water level is drawn down is also seen as a way to encourage lake trout harvest; although it's been determined that relicensing funding cannot go toward that effort. Horner said improved access would likely have worked through at the county level with the help of the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.

This winter's slightly higher lake level will likely translate into a robust year for kokanee, which deposit their eggs along Pend Oreille's rocky shoreline. The egg take at Sullivan Springs and the Cabinet Gorge Hatchery totaled more than 19 million.

If things stay on track, Horner estimates some 16 million kokanee fry will be released this summer.