

Lake bass rule goes before commission

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Measure likely won't hook support of department

SANDPOINT -- A proposal to increase bass harvest restrictions on Lake Pend Oreille and the Pend Oreille River goes before the Idaho Fish and Game Commission in November.

But it's likely the proposal won't have the blessing of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game because there is no strong consensus among bass anglers. Data also show Pend Oreille bass are far from imperiled.

"All those things indicate it would be premature to change bass regulations right now," said Ned Horner, Fish and Game's Panhandle fisheries manager.

The proposal would implement a trophy bass rule on the Pend Oreille. From Jan. 1 to June 30, anglers would be required to release all bass. Anglers would be allowed two bass, none between 12 and 16 inches, from July 1 to Dec. 31. The rule would also prevent any weigh-in tournaments from Jan. 1 to June 30, unless needed for biological reasons.

The statewide harvest limit for bass is six fish, none of which can be under a foot long.

Some bass anglers were delighted with the proposal, while others were horrified by it, according to Horner.

Anglers who stalk bass in the spring panned the proposal because it would eliminate their fishing opportunities. Competitive anglers said they would support the new rule, but only if they could still stage weigh-in tournaments prior to July 1. Such tournaments involve keeping bass in a live well, weighing them and returning them to the water.

But Horner said the department does not support such a clause because it would confer a privilege not enjoyed by all bass anglers.

"If there's a regulation, it needs to apply to everybody," he said.

Along with the range of opinion, there is also evidence the Pend Oreille's largemouth bass population is healthy, Horner said.

Additionally, concern is mounting over the impacts of the thriving smallmouth bass population. Smallmouth bass were introduced into the Noxon Reservoir in Montana in the 1980s and migrated into the Pend Oreille via the Clark Fork River.

Smallmouth are now the dominant bass species in the Pend Oreille River and biologists are seeing a sharp decline in native minnow species, namely pike minnow, red-side shiners and pea mouth. The rapidly expanding range of smallmouth bass has other anglers worried, Horner said.

"People are wondering what they're doing to kokanee, cutthroat and other species," he said.

Although the proposal likely won't get a do-pass recommendation from the department, the Fish and Game Commission has the final say on whether the rule is implemented.

The commission is scheduled to take up the proposal during its Nov. 16-18 quarterly meeting in Twin Falls.