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Fisheries plan fails to gain consensus

By *MIKE McLEAN*
Hagadone News Network

SPOKANE -- Idaho would split Avista Corp. funding with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe for native fisheries improvements under a proposal that failed to reach consensus Monday.

While the Idaho Department of Fish and Game reluctantly seemed to accept the offer of \$175,000 annually to aid westslope cutthroat and bull trout fisheries enhancements, the deal didn't please the U.S. Department of the Interior, which, through its Bureau of Indian Affairs, represents the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

"I don't think we can support it without some understanding of how the figures are derived," said Chris Watson of the Department of the Interior.

Avista is preparing to renew its license to operate the Post Falls Dam in Idaho and five other hydroelectric dams in Washington.

The application must be submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission by Aug. 1.

The native fisheries proposal was up for discussion at a meeting of 40 people representing different interest groups in the Coeur d'Alene/Spokane River drainages affected by the dams.

Ned Horner, regional fisheries manager for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said the department originally estimated it would take about \$350,000 annually to enhance cutthroat and bull trout populations.

The Coeur d'Alene Tribe is developing its own fisheries enhancement program through a confidential settlement process. The tribe owns the southern third of Lake Coeur d'Alene and the lower 20 miles of the St. Joe River. It has jurisdiction over fisheries in its waters.

"We understand the tribe is doing its own thing and that's great," Horner said.

But it means the state would get half of the fisheries mitigation money offered by Avista.

"We felt \$175,000 is underfunded," Horner said. "But if that's the offer, we'll live with that, and that's how much work we'll do."

Some of the funding could be used on recreational fisheries if it's compatible with native fish, he said.

"The recreational fishing component tries to offset lost fishing opportunities for the adfluvial westslope cutthroat trout," Horner said.

Adfluvial trout spawn in streams and spend their adult lives in lakes. They were once in greater abundance in Lake Coeur d'Alene.

Bull trout, a federally protected species due to loss of habitat, can be found mainly in the upper reaches of the St. Joe River. Some bull trout are also adfluvial.

For instance, the funding could be used for catch-out ponds in which non-native rainbow trout could be stocked where they won't compete with native trout.

"There's no intent of using funding that doesn't have ties to bull trout or adfluvial westslope cutthroat trout," Horner said. "It is not intended for crappie management or anything like that."

Idaho Fish and Game resources will still be used to maintain some non-native sportfish in Lake Coeur d'Alene.