

Corps' reluctance worries Lakes Commission

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Agency won't commit to higher winter pools

Sandpoint—The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is adopting a recommendation that Lake Pend Oreille's level be lowered to 2,051 this winter.

But concern is rising over the Corps' reluctance in committing to hold the lake level at 2,055 feet during subsequent winters. The higher winter pool is seen as essential to kokanee and bull trout recovery efforts on Lake Pend Oreille.

The recommendation to keep a lower pool elevation this winter, which was considered by a panel of state and federal resource managers on Wednesday, did not come as a surprise since it is generally agreed that it would not hamper efforts to restore the lake's population of kokanee.

That's because this year's class of spawning kokanee is considered less than robust, which should leave plenty of shoreline gravel for the landlocked sockeye salmon redds. However, Idaho Fish and Game fisheries biologists say subsequent year classes of kokanee will need additional spawning habitat, creating the need for higher lake levels.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not object to a lower lake level this winter and agrees a higher winter pool is needed the following winter since efforts to boost the kokanee dovetail with the recovery of endangered bull trout. Kokanee are the primary food source for Pend Oreille bull trout.

The Corps, which manipulates the lake level at the Albeni Falls Dam near Oldtown, is agreeing to a lower pool this winter, said Patricia Graesser, the Corps' spokeswoman in Seattle.

"They did make a recommendation for the 2,051 foot level this winter," Graesser said.

But the agency stopped short of deciding higher winter pools for subsequent years, a move that has members of North Idaho's Lakes Commission worried.

"The Corps' response to next year was very unclear and very disappointing because the clear request from Idaho Fish and Wildlife is to have the lake up higher next year," said Ford Elsaesser, chairman of the Lakes Commission, who participated in Wednesday's Technical Management Team teleconference.

Corps of Engineers officials said they wanted more detail on Idaho Fish and Game protocols for kokanee recovery and more information of Fish and Wildlife's bull trout recovery plan. But the Lakes Commission points out information on both recovery plans is already at hand and spelled out in Fish and Wildlife's biological opinion on Pend Oreille bull trout.

Elsaesser said Fish and Wildlife's request for a higher winter pool in 2004-05 also won the support of each member of the Technical Management Team, which is made up of representatives from the Bonneville Power Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service and officials from four Northwest states. Only the Corps was unsure, he said.

"Every participant supported the request from Fish and Wildlife, even the downstream people that normally don't have the same interests as we do," he said, referring to demands for Pend Oreille water for power generation and chum salmon recovery.

"We're having a difficult time understanding why the Corps is not accepting the request for next year, and obviously we're doing everything we can do to try and convince them that they should honor the request."

The Lakes Commission is also asking for the Corps to consider refilling the lake as soon as possible in the spring for recreation and emergency access purposes. The Corps took that request under advisement.

Concern was expressed during the teleconference that quickening the pace to summer pool would impact spawning chum salmon, but Lakes Commission member Linda Mitchell said those fish spawn in December.

"I'm not exactly sure what the problem is there. There's plenty of water in mid-March coming from many sources," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said the commission is pulling together additional documentation to fortify its position on the winter pool issue and plans to enlist the help of Idaho's top officials to advance the position.

District 1 state Rep. George Eskridge remains hopeful the Lakes Commission, which was appointed by Gov. Dirk Kempthorne this summer, will steadily gain clout among regional and federal officials. Eskridge, Rep. John Campbell and Sen. Shawn Keough lobbied for the formation of the commission to give Idaho a voice during water resource planning sessions.

"I think this will give the state of Idaho more of a political influence on the operation of the lake than we've been able to have before," he said. "I think we're going to be a lot better off with it than without it."