

Lake will be kept at high winter pool

By KEITH KINNAIRD

News editor

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SANDPOINT -- Lake Pend Oreille will be kept at an elevated pool level this winter to aid in the restoration of its struggling kokanee population, according to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

The lake's water level will be drafted to 2,055 feet above sea level no later than Nov. 20, said Chip Corsi, supervisor of Fish and Game's Panhandle region.

"Apparently the downstream needs were not so great that they trumped our upstream needs," Corsi said on Monday.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began letting water out of the lake earlier this fall, but it was unclear which elevation -- 2,055 feet or 2,051 feet -- the drawdown would stop at.

Fish and Game requested a higher winter pool level to capitalize on a modest population of female spawners, which was estimated to be about 100,000 fish. The higher winter pool results in substantially more kokanee spawning habitat.

There was a chance fish managers on the Columbia River would seek additional winter water to help out chum salmon below Bonneville Dam. Water from Pend Oreille is typically used to backfill Washington's Grand Coulee Reservoir when water is drawn from there to boost flows below Bonneville.

But Corsi said the wet fall weather mitigated the need for water downstream.

"It was not so much of a tug of war over that water, which is a good thing. That is good news," he said.

Although the higher winter lake level results in good egg-to-fry survival among kokanee, the landlocked form of salmon is still in the grip of a predator trap because of the ample population of lake and rainbow trout.

"They're eating up a lot of the gains we're making on lake level benefits in terms of fish survival, so we're really struggling to get ahead on kokanee," said Corsi.

Fish and Game plans to meet with Panhandle anglers sometime this winter to update them on the status of kokanee recovery and troll for ideas on the slowing the predation inertia. The department will also be evaluating its hatchery program and getting a better handle on how Pend Oreille whitefish fit into the whole equation.

Fish and Game would also like to update its population estimate for rainbow trout, which is not an easy task. Trap nets have been useful in gauging the size of the lake trout population, but rainbows tend to frequent the depths of open water.

"Rainbows are a little bit more enigmatic. They're harder to enumerate and yet we also know that they have a very high consumption rate of kokanee, so it's an important piece of information," Corsi said.

The last rainbow population study was done about five years ago and involved a Fish and Game official going out with anglers to tag fish, a process which took two years. Corsi said the department is going to be testing acoustic equipment to see if it can be used to help accurately estimate the number of rainbow in Lake Pend Oreille.

Fish and Game figures there are between 10,000 and 20,000 rainbows longer than 16 or 17 inches.

"That right now is a guess, but it's an educated guess," said Corsi.