

Panel dives into water

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Governor appoints basin commission

Sandpoint—After announcing members to a commission tasked with protecting critical water bodies in northern Idaho, Gov. Dirk Kempthorne immersed himself in Lake Pend Oreille's charms.

As he swam in waters off City Beach, Kempthorne said, "The water is perfect, isn't it?"

The Commission he appointed aims to keep it that way. Before wading into the dark blue waters of the lake, he named the people who would hold seats on the Lake Pend Oreille Basin Commission.

They include Brent Baker, Marc Brinkmeyer, Ford Elsaesser, Craig Hill, and Linda Mitchell—all of whom own businesses in Bonner County and are acquainted with water quality and quantity issues in Bonner County.

In making the announcement, Kempthorne said the time is right for locals to have a voice in lake issues to help balance the needs and desires of federal resource managers and downstream interests.

"This is the opportunity to bring these ideas together—the local perspective," Kempthorne said as Lake Pend Oreille shimmered in the background. "These representatives are going to begin to establish a vision that we can begin to track and move forward with."

The commission, which will have input on management decisions regarding Pend Oreille and Priest lakes and the Pend Oreille and Priest Rivers, is the product of House Bill 110. The bill was sheparded through the Legislature last session by Reps. John Campbell and George Eskridge, in addition to Sen. Shawn Keough.

"The commission makes a lot of sense. It's going to bring all of us together for a focus point so that we can leverage all of our concerns through the commission and have the influence we need to have to preserve our interests in the lake and the river, in contrast to what the downstream interests there are in our bodies of water up here," said Eskridge, a Republican from Dover.

Elsaesser, the commission's chairman, praised the trio of lawmakers and said legislation typically starts off with a focus that narrows as compromises are struck through the drafting phase. House Bill 110 is atypical in that respect.

"Our legislators," he said, "were actually able to broaden the scope to really include the focusing on one particular lake or one particular issue."

Exactly how much influence the commission will have remains to be seen, however. The proposed Rock Creek mine in northwestern Montana, for instance, could have dire impacts on Lake Pend Oreille, which is downstream from the project.

The commission will have a key role, Kempthorne said, explaining that between federal wildlife and water quality regulations and state standards, the commission will be able to spot trouble quickly.

Campbell, a Republican from Sandpoint, said the commission will have some degree of authority instead of just being a voice in the crowd.

“Right now the commission is set in place,” said Campbell. “Water ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ may be two very small words, but they are very broad brushes.”

During the brief presentation, children splashed in the water and others looked out over the lake, as if mesmerized by the flashes of sunlight glinting off tiny ripples on the surface.

“Well, it’s a very warm day, Kempthorne said. “It is very tempting to take advantage of this lake behind me. Anybody for a dip?”