

Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River Commission Meeting MINUTES
December 16, 2014 from 9 AM until 12 PM
Dover City Hall
699 Lakeshore Avenue Dover, Idaho 83825

Commissioner's present: Ford Elsaesser, Brent Baker, Doug Conde, Craig Hill, Linda Mitchell, Marc Brinkmeyer, Erin Mader (Coordinator), Molly McCahon (Asst. Coordinator)

32 in audience

9:08 am – Commence meeting

Ford Elsaesser welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the Lakes Commission Board members and staff.

Approval of Minutes:

Linda moved to approve the 10/23/14 minutes. Doug seconded the motion, *the motion carried.*

Amended Contract with Bonner Soil and Water Conservation District (BSWCD)

Brent moved to accept the addition of Molly McCahon as a BSWCD employee providing services to the Lakes Commission. Craig seconded the motion, *the motion carried.*

Agency presentations

Andy Dux, Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game (IDFG), updated the Lakes Commission on the Pend Oreille fishery.

Andy explained that a total of 175,212 lake trout have been removed by nets and anglers over the life of the Pend Oreille lake trout suppression program. Trap net catches, which target large fish, peaked in 2006 and have been very low and stable over the last 6 years. Gill net catches, targeting smaller fish, have steadily declined since 2009.

Andy updated the Commission on the rebounding kokanee population. He showed that both kokanee fry and adult kokanee numbers have risen to be equivalent to counts in the early nineties. He briefly reviewed the kokanee lifecycle: kokanee spawn on the shoreline in November or December, the fry emerge from the redds in the spring, they typically mature around 3 or 4 years old, and they die after they spawn.

Andy explained that Lake Pend Oreille has had very high densities of Mysis shrimp for decades, but for some unknown reason the population collapsed in 2012. The population appears to be rebuilding. In 2014 numbers averaged 266 individual shrimp per square meter down from an average of 839 individuals over the last four decades. Priest Lake had a less dramatic drop in numbers, but Priest has never had the abundance that Pend Oreille had.

Andy said that bull trout numbers have been increasing gradually according to trap net catches.

Andy reviewed the current recreational fishery on Pend Oreille. IDFG increased kokanee catch limit to 15 per day. Rainbow trout growth rate is improving helping to rebuild the trophy population. The lake

trout angler incentive program is still place, but catches are declining with diminished population. A creel study is currently in progress which will give estimates of harvests and fishing efforts for each species.

Andy summarized the conclusions of his presentation. Lake trout suppression is working with a decreased population and IDFG is transitioning to a long-term maintenance approach. Kokanee are quickly rebuilding providing the best kokanee fishery for many years. The bull trout population is stable or possibly increasing. The rainbow trout trophy fishery is rebuilding. Overall, the Pend Oreille fishery is rebuilding to offer great and diverse fishing opportunities.

Andy described the Lake Pend Oreille kokanee habitat enhancement project that began this fall in Idlewilde Bay. He explained that both Scenic and Idlewilde Bay both have downwelling to the aquifer that offers excellent kokanee spawning habitat. This fall IDFG placed 1,300 cubic feet of $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch gravel over a forty foot wide band in the bay. The band runs between 2041' and 2001' elevation. This will be done two more times totaling a half mile of improved habitat. Andy showed an underwater video that clearly displayed many kokanee using the fresh gravel and an image displaying hundreds of deceased kokanee washing up on the shore of the bay.

Andy answered a couple of questions leading to these points:

- Walleye appear to be remaining at low densities in Pend Oreille.
- The kokanee population is similar to the population of the early nineties and the seventies, but the 1950s and 1960s had a much bigger population.

Jim Fredericks, IDFG, updated the Lakes Commission on the Priest Lake fishery.

Jim reviewed the history of the Priest Lake fishery. Cutthroat trout had a world renowned fishery until the 1950s and a bull trout fishery until the 1970s. Kokanee were introduced in 1930s and offered an annual harvest of about 100,000 fish for twenty years. Lake trout were introduced in 1925, but did not really boom until Mysis shrimp were introduced in 1965. Priest holds the state record for biggest lake trout ever caught at 57.5 lbs. Jim explained that fishing effort was very high in the 1960s and 1970s. Kokanee numbers were also high in those decades. Lake trout numbers got very high in the 1990s and it has been suspected that the mean size of lake trout has decreased over the years as their numbers have increased.

Jim reviewed the fishery history of Upper Priest Lake. He said that lake trout were non-existent in 1956; they were infrequent by 1985, and common by 1993. Lake trout have been removed from the Upper Lake since 1998. Netting was used from 2006 until this year. The annual netting effort removed the majority of the population each year, but other lake trout migrated up to restore the population each time. The cost of the program varied between 20 and 30,000 dollars each year and was funded by the Kalispel tribe and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jim explained that currently IDFG is in a study phase on Priest Lake to decide how to manage the fishery in the next management period that starts in 2019. He described the two main goals of the current management plan for the lakes as being: collecting missing information on the fishery and secondly to work with stakeholders to eventually make the decision on how to future manage the fishery. IDFG is currently working on both of these goals. He explained that initially there was uproar in the Priest community because there was belief that IDFG had begun netting lake trout out of the main lake. He later explained that the uproar has died down because the development of the stakeholder group has helped to include and inform the public of what decisions are being made.

Jim went over the results of the population assessments done over the last year at Priest Lake. A graduate student from University of Idaho has run most of the population analysis studies. Study efforts have included marking individual fish of all the species in the lake; analyzing the age of maturity, reproductive rates, and age structure of the fish species; and exploring trophic interactions (who is eating whom).

Studies thus far have shown that average lake trout size has decreased over the decades. In 1952 the average lake trout was 30 inches long. In 1978 the average lake trout was 27 inches and 12 pounds. In 2013 the average lake trout was 18.5 inches and 2.3 pounds. This is most likely the result of lake trout in Priest Lake surviving off of shrimp due to limited fish to eat. The growth trajectory of a lake trout in Priest Lake is very different than Pend Oreille. Fish follow the same growth path for about 6 years and then Priest lake trout growth really slows, but on Pend Oreille they typically kept growing bigger for their lifespan which can be fifty years.

Survival studies revealed that a higher number of released lake trout die than was previously estimated. The studies showed that greater than thirty percent of released fish die. This means that there are likely less tagged fish at large than was thought which corrupts past population estimates. There are likely about 40,000 to 60,000 lake trout currently in Priest Lake. This study also looked at releasing the fish at depth to see if it increased survival. This technique did not prove to benefit survival.

Population assessments showed that kokanee numbers boomed in 2011 to 2013, and they still remain high in 2014. Counts showed a population of less than 5,000 kokanee in the system in the decade previous to 2011 and 20 to 30 thousand kokanee since. The bull trout population is also at its highest count since 1985 with 81 redds counted at the Upper Lake.

Jim answered a number of questions leading to these points:

- Studies showed that cutthroat trout numbers are healthy on both the upper and lower lakes.
- Economics are being included in the discussions of future Priest fishery management, but they may not be the driving force in the decision made.

Liz Johson-Gebhardt, Priest Community Forest Connection (PCFC), reported on the development of the Pend Oreille River Passage Trail.

The Pend Oreille River Passage Trail is a trail concept that will run along the north side of the Pend Oreille River connecting Old Town to the trail at Dover. There are numerous little sections of trail that the PCFC is trying to piece together mostly using the Idaho Transportation Department's (ITD) right of way.

PCFC received a technical assistance grant from the National Park Service to help guide the creation of the trail. As part of the grant they held a design workshop on Nov. 14 and 15. The workshop created a conceptual design that clarified right of ways, physical constraints or obstacles, and the basic routes. Youth were also included in designing of the trail allowing for a broader perspective of what would make the trail appealing to users. At the end of the workshop attendants voted to start work with the Oldtown to Albeni Falls Dam section of the trail.

Liz explained that there is no funding secured for the trail because the conceptual design needed to be completed before funds were sought, but she also said that there are a number of known funding opportunities that they will seek. She was going to look into Rails with Trails opportunities and requirements for some sections of the trail. The plan is for the trail to be paved and be American

Disabilities Act compliant. She was hopeful that the entire trail would be completed in five to seven years. She also mentioned that there is a public survey that she would like people to fill out on their webpage at <http://communityforests.com/>.

Susan Drumheller, Idaho Conservation League, gave a presentation on the development of the Pend Oreille Bay Trail and other trail planning in Bonner County.

Susan showed an image of the Pend Oreille bay Trail and explained that a 501c3 non-profit, Friends of the Pend Oreille Bay Trail (FPOBT), formed to bring the public trail concept to fruition. The FPOBT works with Bonner County, the Cities of Sandpoint, Ponderay, and Kootenai, and Idaho Conservation League. Susan explained that the benefits and goals of the trail are to secure safe access to Lake Pend Oreille; link communities with a non-motorized trail; create a destination park for Ponderay; to offer an outdoor classroom; to generate economic vitality; and increase the quality of life in the area. The trail has a number of public safety issues including railroad track crossings, commuting issues, and lead contamination (Brownfields Site).

The FPOBT received assistance from the National Park Service to develop a concept plan. Phase 1 of the plan was completed this year with the buying of four parcels of land spanning more than 6,000 feet of waterfront at \$400,000 apiece. This accomplishment was memorialized with a giant cairn built along the trail recognizing the major donors to the trail.

Susan went over the next steps involved for trail completion. She said there will be a public workshop in March to work on a master trail plan. Goals include creating a safe railroad crossing for Ponderay, securing an easement through the railroad's right of way, and cleaning up the Brownfield's site which includes Black Rock.

Susan briefly described the Ponderay Lakeside Subarea Plan which is a separate but related City of Ponderay planning effort that is exploring future visions for their beach area. Creating a safe railroad crossing at Ponderay is estimated to cost between \$1 and \$3 million dollars alone and the City needs to justify this expense with an economically beneficial vision. She showed a draft concept of the Ponderay City Beach area with a large marina buffered by a jetty. She also mentioned that the City is focused on keeping the area affordable for the current population.

Susan went over some of the other trail planning occurring in Bonner County. She said that Bonner County has an unfinished trail plan that should be finished as it will create buy-in for future trail development when opportunity arises. She is also working on a Greater Sandpoint Greenprint and there is currently a survey online (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/bonnercosurvey>) that will be used to help with both planning efforts. She also posted the website for the Pend Oreille Bay Trail at www.pobtrail.org.

Lakes Commission Discussion

Ford summarized the points of the October 23rd public meeting and a discussion followed about the future steps for lake level management.

Ford reviewed the Lakes Commissions' positions on lake levels. He said that he expects a reply to the original Commission letter from the US Army Corps of Engineers (COE) by early February. He emphasized the Commission's desire for full pool for the entire month of September. He pointed out that this year was dry and the water was down by the beginning of November showing that it can come

down rapidly. He thanked the Save Pend Oreille Alliance for their help to increase involvement on the lake level issues. He acknowledged that there will always be pressure for water from Pend Oreille. He said that the proposal to draw water from Pend Oreille in the late summer has been removed from the Kalispel MOA and stated that on all other current issues the Lakes Commission is aligned with the goals of the Kalispel Tribe.

Further discussion led to a rough timeline. On January 21st Ford will attend a meeting with COE, Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), and other State of Idaho representatives to discuss and hopefully agree on future lake level operations. Following this meeting and the letter response from COE the Lakes Commission will meet in late February or early March to draft a formal response with any changes to our current positions. A representative of the COE commented that it is likely that we will come to agreement on future fall operations this winter, but agreements on winter operations will probably take longer and guarantees on springtime operations will probably not be made.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:45 AM.

Approved by:

Lakes Commission Chair

Date



C.L. "BUTCH" OTTER
GOVERNOR

June 24, 2014

Mr. Ford Elsaesser
Chairman, Lakes Commission
1224 Washington Ave., Suite 101
Sandpoint, ID 83864

Dear Ford,

I want to thank you and the Lakes Commission for your continuing work in carrying out the mandates on water quality and water quantity assigned the Commission. I appreciate your diligent service to our state.

I wish to ensure the Lakes Commission that I too am deeply concerned about the potential for federal government agencies to adversely alter summer and fall water levels on Lake Pend Oreille. I want to stress that I intend to use all available means to protect the sovereign rights of our state to make sure that Lake Pend Oreille is first and foremost managed in accordance with the needs and interests of Idahoans.

Idaho has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bonneville Power Administration to reach an agreement on this September's lake level management. Kokanee spawning and Clark Fork Delta restoration habitat work scheduled for this year are some of the numerous factors, along with recreation needs and the priorities of local citizens, that factor into lake level management. We have an agreement to maintain full pool until September 15th this year. The lake elevation will be at least 2061 feet through the third weekend in September and 2060.5 feet by the end of that month. The lake level will be held steady during the fourth weekend of September to accommodate the Head of the Pend Oreille Regatta.

Regarding the recent discussions on amending the Columbia River Treaty with Canada, Idaho has been prominently at the table with the region's other states and sovereign tribes from the very beginning. As a result, the draft treaty recommendation recently submitted to the U.S. State Department calls for no changes to current management operations at Lake Pend Oreille.

I commit to remaining vigilant to any threats to summer and fall lake levels. The Commission's regional leadership and perspective are critical in this process and I look forward to working together with you to protect Idaho's best interests.

As Always – Idaho, "Esto Perpetua"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C.L. Butch Otter".

C.L. "Butch" Otter
Governor of Idaho

CLO/sg