

Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River Commission Meeting MINUTES  
September 17, 2015 from 9 AM until 12 PM  
Beardmore Building  
119 Main Street, Priest River, Idaho 83856

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

55 in audience

**Approval of Minutes:**

Brent moved to approve the 6/04/14 minutes. Linda seconded the motion, *the motion carried.*

**Presentations**

*Ken Hagmann spoke about the history and present condition of the Priest Lake Thorofare and the breakwater structure.*

Ken explained that he is a Priest Lake resident who was appointed to the Priest Lake Thorofare Advisory Committee by the County Commissioners 15 years ago to research the thorofare situation.

Ken explained that the Upper Priest Lake is connected to the lower Priest Lake by the thorofare. In the 1960's President Johnson preserved the thorofare as a Wild and Scenic River with the intent to maintain access for all through the thorofare.

The breakwater structure was built in the early 1900s. For about 60 to 70 years the breakwater worked very effectively by allowing the river to keep up enough velocity to carry sediment out of the end of the river and dump it into the deeper lake waters which limited sediment build up and kept the thorofare passable. Up until the 1960s the Forest Service maintained the thorofare by occasionally dredging it. After the 1960s Bonner County tried to maintain it. There was no dredging or maintenance really needed until the 1990s. Since that time Bonner County has contracted Copper Bay Construction to do necessary work.

The 1997 floodwaters damaged the breakwater which allowed channels to develop under the structure. These extra channels slow water movement and allow sediment to drop in the shallows at the mouth of the river instead of carrying sediment out into the deeper lake. About ten years ago Bonner County put up about fifty thousand dollars to develop a plan for the thorofare. The engineering plan estimated a cost of about 1.3 million dollars. That amount of money was not available and since that time only a little maintenance work has been done on the wall, but now the breakwater is failing and a remedy needs to be found.

The logistics of the project are quite complicated. All work must be done in low water between November 1 and April 1. During this time all roads are closed and the upper part of the lake is often frozen. It is unlikely that Bonner County will come up with the money for the project so the Committee is looking for funding opportunities at the State and Federal level.

The Thorofare Committee is on the verge of securing a dredging permit for the project. Dredging would require excavation of sand and then boating or trucking of the sand to another location. This would cost

between 50,000 and 500,000 dollars. The cost for total replacement of the breakwater (as a rock structure) is estimated at 700,000 dollars. So far there has been about sixty thousand dollars spent on maintaining the breakwater and it will take another twenty thousand to keep that up for another year or two.

Ken stated a number of reasons that access for all boats needs to be retained at the thorofare. Foremost is that the Wild and Scenic designation federally mandates access for all people. Also, the thorofare serves as emergency services access to the upper lake and it allows the Forest Service to maintain campgrounds and pump toilets at the upper lake. It also provides access to residences on the thorofare.

*Fred Cox added an update on financials to the presentation.* The Thorfare Committee is set up as a non-profit and will take tax deductible donations. So far there is a little over \$7,000 in the bank with another ten thousand promised from public donations. The Committee has set up a website at <http://www.priestlakethorofare.com/> on which you can donate and keep up to date on the project. The Committee is seeking donations from the Priest Lake resorts, individuals, foundations, the Priest River and Sandpoint communities and more.

Questions and discussion after the presentation focused on these topics:

- Dredging would only take place in the area of the breakwater at the mouth area of the thorofare.
- Dredging permit is a joint permit between Army Corps and Idaho Dept. of Lands and it goes through Idaho Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- If nothing was done to maintain the thorofare entrance it is likely it would silt in and form a delta system with constantly shifting, shallow channels. This could have an unpredictable impact on the water movement in the lake and lake levels.
- On a nice summer day more than 200 boats will travel up the thorofare.
- Bigger boats are trying to use the thorofare which can increase sediment in the channel and be noisy for residents.
- There was a discussion about what was the exact wording of the designation that President Johnson named the thorofare and if there is a written record available.

***Andy Dux, Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), gave an update on the fishery research that has been taking place at Priest Lake over the last two years.***

Andy described the history of the Priest Lake fishery. Up until the 1950s Priest Lake had a world class cutthroat fishery and an excellent bull trout fishery until the 1970s. Kokanee were introduced in the 1930s and led to an annual harvest of 100,000 fish for 20 years. Lake trout was introduced in 1925 and stayed at low densities for decades, but mysis shrimp changed that when they were introduced in 1965. From 1956 until 2003 kokanee numbers declined significantly, lake trout numbers increased significantly and fishery effort dropped.

Andy briefly described the history of the Upper Priest Lake fishery. In 1956 lake trout were non-existent in the upper lake, by 1985 they were occasionally caught and they were common by 1993. Commercial removal of lake trout began in 2006. About 70 to 80 percent of the lake trout are removed from the upper lake every year, but they reestablish by moving up from the lower lake.

IDFG is considering options for future management of the Priest Lake fishery. These include discontinuing the upper lake lake trout suppression efforts and allowing lake trout to dominate both lakes, developing a plan for suppression of lake trout in both lakes and seeking funding for that plan, or trying to provide a balanced fishery that allows for lake trout, kokanee, and bull trout all to exist at some acceptable level. The current six-year management plan includes goals for collecting data on the fishery and developing and working with a stakeholder group to guide the development of the next management plan which starts in 2019.

Over the last two years a U of I student, Elizabeth Ng, and IDFG biologists studied lake trout in Priest Lake. Major conclusions from their research were that the Priest Lake has a moderate density of lake trout which is less than was previously thought. Studies showed that lake trout have very high survival with almost all mortality resulting from angler exploitation. The growth of Priest Lake lake trout is initially very fast, but around age nine growth typically slows dramatically. The lake trout in Priest most often have poor body condition and they have low reproductive rates which is most likely the result of surviving off of a diet primarily consisting of shrimp.

IDFG completed some other studies on Priest Lake over the last two years. Angler surveys showed that although angler efforts are lower than historic levels they have bumped up since the early 2000s. In that period kokanee angling efforts have increased a little and effort towards lake trout has decreased slightly. Kokanee numbers bumped up unexpectedly in 2012 and have stayed pretty steady at that abundance. Westslope cutthroat trout surveys showed that they are well distributed throughout the lake at low densities. Elizabeth also completed a study evaluating lake trout angling mortality post release. She found mortality rates of about 30 percent twenty days after release. This is quite a bit higher than was thought and this contributes to a higher angler harvest than was previously estimated. Bull trout numbers are stable or increasing.

***Tom Woolf, Idaho Department of Agriculture (ISDA), gave an update on aquatic invasive species.***

Tom started with an overview of Eurasian watermilfoil. No herbicide treatments were scheduled on Pend Oreille or Priest this year. Cocolalla Lake was treated earlier this week. Milfoil should start really surfacing as the drawdown takes place. Tom said that higher densities of milfoil were observed on Priest late this summer which will probably warrant a treatment in 2016.

Tom next focused flowering rush. He explained that a cooperative dry-ground rush treatment project including many local and federal partners was showing promise. Surveys show flowering rush is lakewide in Pend Oreille and has spread downstream almost reaching Canada.

Tom talked about the boat inspection program. This is the seventh year of the program. There were 17 stations operating this year completing 61,000 inspections with more than half in northern Idaho. The Bonner County stations inspected over 12,000 boats intercepting three with mussels and 30 with weeds. In the length of the program 143 vessels have been intercepted with mussels with 23 being found this summer. So far sampling has shown no presence of mussel veligers (larvae) in the Columbia River system.

***Gary Spackman, Idaho Department of Water Resources, spoke about this season's lake levels on Priest Lake and the operation of Outlet Dam.***

Gary started out by recognizing the work of Karl Duncan who has operated Outlet Dam since 1958.

Gary explained that Avista used to manage Outlet Dam. Avista had a consortium of power producers supporting their work at Outlet Dam by paying Avista. This money provided salary for Karl. Avista gave the dam back to the State a few years ago and now no money is entering the Outlet Dam account. There is about 400,000 dollars left in the account to pay Karl and maintain the dam structure. He posed the question of what to do with the dam structure down the road?

Gary explained that late in July of this year they had to drop the outflows to the river to about 30 cfs and they were able to hold the lake pretty stable at full pool at the outflow for the rest of the summer. There is virtually no inflow information for any tributaries into the lake. He said that they did take measurements at the end of the summer, but there is still a lot of information that needs to be known for future preparation.

Questions and discussion after the presentation focused on these topics:

- We need a better understanding of the impact to fisheries on the river from these low flows.
- Gary explained that Idaho statute (70-507) requires the lake level to be held at 3 feet has a water right secured in 1950. Even if a water right was secured as an in-stream flow in the river that would still be secondary to the lake water right.
- Gary explain that the Idaho statute states that the lake level be held at the three foot elevation until the end of the recreational season. He said that according to Karl's records the end of the recreational season has been considered October 1.

The meeting was adjourned at 12 PM.