

Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River Commission Meeting MINUTES

May 2, 2017 9:10 am until 12:23 pm

Commissioner's present: Ford Elsaesser (Chair), Linda Mitchell, Marc Brinkmeyer, Craig Hill, Darrell Early, Molly McCahon (Coordinator), 48 members of the public in audience

- Craig moved to approve the 1/27/17 minutes. Marc seconded the motion, *the motion carried.*

Presentations

Molly McCahon, Update on Watercraft Inspection Station

Molly announced that Tom Woolf left the Department of Agriculture (ISDA) for a job with Montana's watercraft inspection program. She also explained that early in the season there was risk that ISDA was going to cut back on spending, even with the knowledge that invasive mussel veliger's were discovered in Tiber Reservoir, Montana. Fortunately, the Idaho State Legislature and Governor supported emergency funding for 2017 and 2018 to keep dawn to dusk hours 7 days a week, add 3 new stations, and add one 24 hour station. In addition, a bill was proposed and supported both by the House and Senate to create a new body for invasive species oversight, but that bill was vetoed by the Governor.

Andy Dux, Idaho Fish and Game Priest Lake Fisheries Update

Andy provide an update on F&G's management planning process. Fish and Game creates a 6 year fishery management plan that guides what they do for different drainages throughout Idaho. They also update Fishing Rules every couple years. When LPO started seeing changes to the fishery based on management decisions, F&G started hearing from folks that they wanted to look into how the Priest Lake fishery was managed. So, in response to that, F&G conducted public input scoping, graduate studies on lake trout and formed the Priest Lake Fishery advisory committee (a cross section of folks representing P. Lake) This committee has been meeting constructively for several years albeit long process with difficult situations. Ultimately this group came up with several fish management alternatives F&G will be taking these alternatives out for broader public outreach input in the coming months and will follow with a public survey. They would like to complete the decision process by the end of the calendar year. Next management plan will begin in 2019.

The three proposed alternatives are:

Status Quo – Continue existing management direction. Manage primarily for a sustainable yield Lake Trout harvest fishery.

Restore Traditional Fishery – Restore a Kokanee fishery capable of supporting a high catch rates and harvest. Enhance native Westlope Cutthroat Trout and restore limited harvest opportunity. Enhance native Bull Trout, including restoring trophy fishing opportunity. Manage for a low density Lake Trout population.

Mixed Species Fishery – Reduce the Lake Trout population to support moderate catch rates and harvest, while allowing Kokanee to reach moderate density and catch rates. Provide some added conservation benefit and improved fishing for Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout.

Questions:

Ford: Seems to me there is strong sentiment to leave Lake Trout alone in Priest Lake except for Upper Priest Lake. Andy: Actually seems to be about 50/50.

Tom Whalen: Any economic reviews been conducted? Andy: No, but it is logical to think that increased anglers would fuel the economy.

Ford: Is it true that there was a resurgence in kokanee populations in Priest Lake. Andy: There were a few years when kokanee populations improved but it seems to have been an inexplicable blip as the numbers are back down.

A general discussion took place on various options for management including: stocking kokanee, increasing lake trout bounty, historical fishing and the economy. Andy explained that they plan to really look at options and feedback objectively.

Chip Corsi - Idaho Fish & Game Priest Lake Siphon Concept Update

Chip started by mentioning that little has changed since his last presentation on the siphon concept several years ago. The Siphon would be located at the outlet of Priest Lake where the dam is. The dam artificially holds the lake up during the summer months, which creates a shallow bay at outlet and affects flows downstream and water temperatures in the Priest River. The P. River is about 40 miles from the lake to outlet at Pend Oreille River. During the summer there are about 2 to 4 weeks when air temps are high enough and flows are low enough that conditions are unsuitable for native fish species. That limits the sport fishing opportunity and the siphon could bolster fish populations.

Concept is to use physics to draw water from deeper colder part of the lake and feed the river. Just replacing the top warm water with cold water from below. Portland State did a study to look at this concept in the past

Would it work? Yes. Would it affect the lake? No. Just replacing the exact cfs that would be going out with colder water. State water law ensures it will not affect lake levels, it also wouldn't affect flows to the river, and it would just be changing temperature. Will it improve fish populations? Chip used several examples from the CDA River and St Joe with similar size and similar water problems. P. River has lowest density of cutthroat. So, F&G does think the change would increase cold fish species populations, thus improving sport fishing. Would like to see people take advantage of Idaho fishing opportunities verses going to Montana. If trout numbers went up it is logical that the number of anglers would too. Chip talked about the significant dollars that are brought into Idaho by the sport fishing industry. Especially places like St Joe and CDA Rivers. Communities around Priest River would likely see economic opportunity. *Linda: What caused uptick in activity in 2011 in CDA. Chip: fish populations increasing, fishing rules changed and we went to year round season and there was also an inflation factor.*

There are 2 reasons we haven't acquired funding to date. Avista funds were being used toward fish passage and flow issues on Clark Fork at Cabinet Gorge. Now, Avista may willing to use settlement agreement funds toward this project. The drought also had an impact on progress because the flow issues become predominate. There was a lot going on and it didn't seem like good timing to insert the siphon concept into the conversation. If the funding for preliminary engineering comes to fruition, it would give us idea on feasibility. The Sullivan project was approx. 5 mill ...this may be more complicated. But if this project were 10 mill but it improves economic activity by 3 -4 million annually it will pay for itself in approx. 5 years. If it was too expensive then maybe the benefits aren't adequate enough. Aesthetics may also be a concern for folks. So ultimately this is a social decision as to whether it will be happen.

Steve Klatt –Bonner County Parks and Waterways Director Priest Lake Water Management Study Update

Steve explained that this study arose from the low water year we saw in 2015. Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR), who manage the dam, became aware they would need to look at drought management. At the same time, Bonner County was looking into improvements to the Thorofore. So with assistance from Senator Keough and others we were able to link the interests of IDWR and Bonner County to come up with a study to look at dam operations, dam improvement and study effectiveness of the breakwater and sustainable navigability in that channel. Mott McDonald is the consultant selected to conduct hydrologic modeling and public outreach in order to present potential alternatives in

low water years. A steering committee has been formed to involve people who are representative of the many elements around Priest Lake and Mott McDonald will be collecting a wide variety of data including a detailed bathymetry study. There will be several public meeting, ideally in July and September. Study will be looking at the option of holding the lake up higher in order to accommodate river flows in low water years. Steve handed out an information sheet which includes a website through IDWR where comments can be submitted and info gathered.

***Molly McCahon - Lakes Commission and Steve Klatt – Bonner County Parks & Waterways Director
Avoid the Shore / Ride the Core Campaign.***

Molly talked about the issue of large wake causing damage to our shorelines. Molly serves on the Bonner County Waterways Advisory Board, where the public has been voicing concern over damage by large wakes for the past 3 years. There is a trend toward bigger boats and boats designed to generate big wakes. There are also more people visiting our area than in the past. Molly talked about meeting with other counties and marine division and how they are seeing the same issue; dock damage, accelerated erosion, and unsafe swimming. Everyone voiced the same sentiment, which is that there is no single solution and that it takes a combination of public awareness, enforcement, and new ordinances and regulations. Bonner County chose to focus on public awareness and increased enforcement. The message is simple: Avoid the Shore Ride the Core. Molly mentioned that the goal isn't to emphasize the 200' wake zone because it often isn't adequate for some of the wakes being generated.

Steve voiced that Bonner County generally does not like endorsing further regulation, but that shorelines are clearly being damaged so we obviously need to address the issue. This has become an increasing issue to property owners particularly on the Pend Oreille River but also on Priest Lake and bays on Lake Pend Oreille. The property damage is significant and the county would be remiss if we didn't address a problem that is quite identifiable. One of the regulations proposed was to ban wake enhanced boats on the Pend Oreille River. Steve voiced that that is not the approach the county wants to take. Steve shared statistics from Cobalt: 5 years ago 10 % of boat sales were from wake enhanced boats. 5 years from now they expect 60% to be wake enhanced boats. We hope that without regulations we can address the problem with education. If that doesn't work we will look at regulations. The county is very against writing regulations that cannot be enforced. If we get some cooperation we can avoid future regulations.

**Jill Cobb – US Forest Service Hydrologist Priest Lake
Hughes Aquatic Restoration Meadows**

Jill started by explaining that she has technically been working on Hughes Meadows for 25 years, but this project started becoming a reality approx. 3 yrs. ago. She is working with a number of partners; USFW, Priest Community Forest Connection, Forest Service, Kalispell tribe, Idaho Conservation League, and Idaho Department of Fish & Game, all of whom are crucial to its success. Hughes Meadow is 16.5 miles northwest of Nordman, it's all 60 square miles are in Boundary County, and it is the largest single tributary to the Upper Priest River. During World War II there was an effort by the government to establish secret airstrips in case the Japanese were to invade the west coast. They created one of these airstrips at Hughes Meadows.

They created a ditch to establish the airstrip, which dropped the groundwater table because water moved through the ditch quickly rather than infiltrating. Because groundwater is no longer being recharged, sensitive plants started to fall out of population and habitat for fish and wildlife was lost. This in turn encouraged non-native vegetation and warm water fish species. Historically when groundwater was released slowly and naturally it produced cold water and water stayed in the meadow longer. Since that has been changed so markedly the stream temps are now not conducive to fish health. There are several rare plant species that are found at Hughes which aren't found elsewhere in Idaho. There is a lot of Reed canary and conifers encroaching on the meadow. Non-native warm water fish species have become predominate due to altered habitat. There are very few bull trout, a few cutthroat and a lot of Brooke Trout.

The design entails putting in a chain of wetlands using “plugs” which will recreate the wetland. There will be a 500’ encouragement channel which will direct water into original channel, replant native vegetation and introduce YY fish so population will crash. Ultimate goals are to have groundwater levels increase, non-native plants reduced by drowning, native plants thriving because they have water, stream temps lowered, and cold water fish habitat restored, and non-native fish will be diminished. Contracting will take place this month and into June. Project will begin summer of 2017 if funding comes to fruition.

**Dave Cobb – US Forest Service Priest Lake, Forester
Hanna Flats Good Neighbor Authority Project**

The Good Neighbor Authority Project came out of the Farm Bill as a way to manage the forests for effectively. The idea is for federal and state agencies to partner in order to achieve their forest management goals. Working with the IDL, which is the first of its kind, to get more restoration work done on our national forests. Panhandle nation forest is approx. 2.5 million acres. Annually there isn’t enough funding to effectively manage all this land. The Hanna Flats project is immediately to the west of the Priest Lake ranger station. 7000 acres on the west side. Between Lamb crk on South end and Kalispell Crk on the N. Improve forest health and reduce forest fuels. As part of the management practices there will be stream buffers and erosion prevention for the entirety of the project. This Collaboration requires a lot of public input, so you will hear more about it through the year.

**Ryne Lyman – Operations Project Manager Albeni Falls Dam
Update on Lake Levels**

Dam has been on free flow as of the 18th of April. Mother Nature in charge at this point. Currently flowing 55,000 kcfs and expected to be on free flow until the first week of June. Expecting level to reach 2061 on free flow. Still 130% of snow pack in Montana. Ford asked about flood risks this year. Forecasts predict 100,000 kcfs and 90,000 is the criteria for downstream flooding, so if the forecast is correct, then there will be a flood risk. Linda: The lake actually went down since it has been on free flow. Ryne mentioned being surprised that they think the lake will go up to 2061 on free flow. Expect to reach summer pool by July 1st unless it gets there on its own on free flow.

**Craig Brengle - Natural Resource Manager Albeni Falls Dam
Fish Passage at Albeni Falls Update**

Craig introduced himself and let the audience know that he was not a fish specialist and that this presentation was developed by the Project Manager from a meeting conducted last week. The fish passage project is for Bull Trout at Albeni Falls Dam. By tagging bull trout they have identified the “terminus” where bull trout prefer to travel, so the design will accommodate that. Bull trout are listed as a threatened species and a biological opinion by USFWS requires mitigation work for bull trout habitat improvement. There is a 50’ elevation difference, so the intent is to construct an elevator, a sorting facility, then trucked them upstream. They go onto a sorting table where they are separated from non-native species like Northern pike, walleye, and bass. Non-natives will go back downstream. *Ford: Have you ever seen a bull trout below the dam? Craig: The Kalispell tribe did find one and it turned out to be a hybrid.*

**Matt Nykiel – Idaho Conservation League
BNSF New Bridge Proposal**

Matt discussed the issue of BNSF build a second bridge next to the existing bridge across Lake Pend Oreille. The primary concern is that the railroad may only need a National General Permit which is a streamlined process for common project and it doesn’t require a public comment period. While no one is sure of the bridges design or safety, the public deserves the opportunity to comment on the proposal once submitted.

Matt provided the Lakes Commission with a letter addressed to the Army Corp asking that the railroad be required to file for an Individual 404 permit, which requires public comment. Matt reminded everyone of the significant derailment in Cocolalla of corn this very week.

Discussion took place on what permits the BNSF bridge already has, if this is about what is being hauled, whether the new bridge might be safer, and permitting processes. In the end, the Lakes Commission agreed to invite BNSF to the next meeting in August and compose a letter to the Corp with the questions brought up in today's meeting.

***Dan Haley – Idaho Department of Environmental Quality
Lake Pend Oreille and Pend Oreille River Geographical Response Plan***

We have written a Geographic Response Plan that identifies areas and conditions that emergency responders can utilize if spills were to occur into the waterways. Plan boundaries are from the Clark Fork River all the way to Albeni Falls Dam. We are in the final stages of document preparation. If the Lake Commission is interested in hearing more, Dan offered to be available if they have any questions at all.

Ford asked for public comment and let the public know we will likely have our next meeting in August in Sandpoint and thanked everyone for coming.

The meeting adjourned at 12:23 pm

Approved by:

Lakes Commission Chair

Date:
