



431 Idaho Panhandle Chapter of Trout Unlimited

P.O. Box 936 Sandpoint, ID 83864

April 3, 2024

Mr. Joe Kozfkay
State Fisheries Manager
Idaho Department of Fish and Game
600 S. Walnut, PO Box 25
Boise, ID 83707

Re: Panhandle Chapter Trout Unlimited comments on the 2025-2030 Fisheries Management Plan

Dear Mr. Kozfky:

The Panhandle Chapter of Trout Unlimited (PCTU) appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the upcoming update of the Idaho Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) for the 2025-2030 time frame. PCTU was established for Trout Unlimited (TU) members based in the Idaho Panhandle, and currently includes 315 members. As you are aware, TU's focus is on conserving, protecting, and restoring coldwater fisheries and their watersheds, and to enhance coldwater angling opportunities. While our comments will address statewide direction, for the most part we will be focusing on coldwater fisheries of the Idaho Panhandle. As a foundation for these comments, we reviewed the 2019-2024 FMP, and considered the implementation that has occurred, the challenges that have been faced, and our perspectives on the current status of coldwater fisheries in the Panhandle and opportunities enhance fisheries and fishing opportunities.

Overall, we strongly support the long-standing emphasis by the Department and Commission for preserving, protection, perpetuating, and managing cold water fisheries conservation and fishing opportunity, and the emphasis on conserving Idaho's native coldwater trout fishing opportunities. Idaho is unique in the lower 48 for its ability to provide high quality fishing opportunities for native trout and salmon, and is internationally recognized for our high quality coldwater fishing opportunities in general. That's a credit to the Department, and its ability to work effectively with a broad suite of partners at all levels. We encourage the Department to continue on that path with this next edition of the FMP, as there are, and will continue to be, significant challenges to maintaining and enhancing coldwater fisheries. Our specific comments are as follows:

Statewide Approach

As noted above, PCTU remains supportive of IDFG emphasis and efforts to maintain and improve wild and native trout fisheries through habitat protection and improvement, use of restrictive regulations where harvest is a limiting factor in meeting population management objectives, and management of non-native species to reduce their impacts on native populations. PCTU members fish across Idaho, and also appreciate efforts to maintain and improve access, particularly on rivers and streams where private property ownership makes waters other inaccessible. One suggested add: In the “Idaho’s Native Fish and Fisheries” section of the resident fish management overview, we suggest including a short summary of Kootenai River burbot.

Kootenai River basin

- Although it’s somewhat assumed in the Kootenai River write up and “Objectives and Strategies” section, we suggest westslope cutthroat trout be given equal consideration with rainbow trout, bull trout, and mountain whitefish in gaging success of the nutrient restoration program and other management actions. Westslope cutthroat trout are presumed to be native in the Kootenai, and make up a not insignificant component of the sport fishery. That said, it’s apparent that the management actions implemented by IDFG and the Kootenai Tribe have resulted in what has become an excellent trout fishery.
- We urge IDFG to continue the cooperative agreement with Montana FWP to maintain the access at Leonia, and if possible, expand the availability dates for use. We also encourage efforts to create at least one more float boat access site on the river, possibly between Moyie Springs and Bonners Ferry. We also wonder if it wouldn’t be possible for IDFG to enter into some sort of long term AccessYes! Agreement with the Kootenai Tribe to reduce or eliminate the launch fee at the Twin rivers site, and ensure viability of that site for anglers into the future.
- Moyie River access is also quite limited, as referenced in the current plan. PCTU supports continued efforts to identify and secure access for both walk and wade and float boat fishing.

Pend Oreille Basin

- PCTU strongly supports continued suppression of lake trout and walleye in Lake Pend Oreille through netting and angler incentives as means to maintain progress on restoring the Pend Oreille fishery to include native bull and westslope cutthroat trout, but also for rainbow trout and kokanee.
- PCTU encourages consideration of enhancing the spring rainbow trout fishery in the lower Clark Fork River, possibly through supplementation, to improve distribution and catch rates.
- PCTU fully supports IDFG engagement with Avista, Montana, USFWS and others to ensure success of the new fish passage facility and hopefully increase fishing opportunities for migratory bull and cutthroat trout. PCTU also supports continuing to aggressively pursue habitat conservation and restoration projects through the Clark Fork Settlement Agreement throughout the lower Clark Fork/Pend Oreille basin.

Priest Basin

- PCTU strongly supports the netting of Upper Priest Lake to maintain suppression of lake trout, allowing westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout to thrive and persist in Upper Priest Lake and River.
- Recognizing that in the 2013-2018 management plan period extensive public engagement resulted in a “stay the course” approach to management of Priest Lake, we would like to see the 2025-2030 plan leave the door open for revisiting that approach if public support and funds allow. It’s clear from the Pend Oreille work that lake trout in Priest Lake could be suppressed with an expectation of benefitting both native fishes and kokanee, and potentially increase participation in fishing on the lake.
- With the recent movement of smallmouth bass into the lower Priest River and the lake, PCTU suggests considering increasing or eliminating bag limits for smallmouth in the Priest system given a potential for conflicts with managing for native species.
- PCTU applauds IDFG for working collaboratively with the Kalispel Tribe to better understand the lower Priest River fishery and other portions of the basin, and supports continued collaboration.
- PCTU strongly supports IDFG participation in the collaborative effort to identify and address limiting factors to the cold water fishery in Priest River downstream from the Lake. Recognizing political obstacles to implementing a coldwater bypass system, we strongly encourage assessment of other means to provide cold water refugia while leaving the door open to reconsider a bypass. Priest River represents unequaled opportunity to significantly restore and enhance over 40 miles of quality trout habitat and provide a high quality trout fishery in close proximity to the urban centers of Spokane and Kootenai County.

Spokane River Basin

Management direction for coldwater fisheries in the Spokane River basin, and in particular for native trout, has been consistent and highly successful for many years, with exception of an apparent decline in St. Joe River bull trout. Other recent work by IDFG has identified opportunities for improving conditions in the St. Maries River basin, and significant mitigation/restoration funding is available through the Avista and CERCLA settlements to address identified needs. Our thoughts on the Spokane basin are as follows:

- If current research identifies pike as a limiting factor for bull trout, we recommend IDFG work with the Coeur d’Alene Tribe and anglers to target pike suppression in areas of the lower river, the lateral lakes and/or southern Coeur d’Alene Lake where predation by pike can be identified or reasonably assumed to be limiting bull trout survival and recruitment.
- As has occurred on other Idaho rivers (eg Teton, Boise, portion of the Henrys Fork), increasing numbers of recreationists such as inner-tubers or micro jet boaters may result in increased conflicts with anglers. We encourage IDFG to be proactive and collaborative in working with counties and river users to address and minimize potential conflicts and to work to ensure angler interests are well represented.
- Continue to identify and develop fishing access (float boat and walk-in) sites on the St. Joe, Coeur d’Alene (main, N Fork and S Fork), and St. Maries rivers.

- Continue collaborative work through the Restoration Partnership to implement projects that meet conservation objectives and make fishing better. Trout Unlimited now has a staff presence working with this process to increase capacity for getting work complete. PCTU appreciates IDFGs helpful approach and looks forward to continued collaboration.

Little North Fork Clearwater

This remote area supports a unique, for the Panhandle, backcountry stream fishing experience for native fish. We recommend maintaining current fishery management, and continued work by IDFG and USFS to maintain trails for access.

PCTU recognizes there are a lot of demands placed on Idaho's fisheries by a diversity of angler groups with differing expectations and desires for management of Idaho's diverse water bodies. We genuinely appreciate the commitment by IDFG and the Commission to emphasize the conservation and management of coldwater fisheries and native fishes to provide exceptional fishing opportunities for Idaho anglers, and hope to be able to work collaboratively with IDFG to help implement these measures wherever a PCTU presence can help advance that part of the mission.

Thanks for accepting these comments.

Sincerely,

Bill Love, President PCTU