



FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AMENDMENT

FWP proposal to be amended: 2027-2028 Fishing Regulation Proposals

Commissioner: *Ian Wargo, Region 1*

Date Received by Commission Liaison: *Amendment #1- September 15, 2026 @1:52 PM*

Proposed Amendment: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the following amendment to the proposed 2027-2028 Fishing Regulation Proposals:

Amend the Little Bitterroot Lake Kokanee Harvest Limit as follows:

- ~~• Kokanee salmon: 10 daily and 20 in possession.~~
- Retain the Western District Standard Daily and Possession Limit for Kokanee Salmon of 20 daily and 40 in possession

Requested by FWP: ☐ **YES** ☒ **NO** (check one)

Rationale and Background: I appreciate the intent behind Proposal 14 and the Department's effort to protect Little Bitterroot Lake as a dependable future brood source. However, I believe reducing the daily kokanee limit from 20 fish to 10 fish is premature and may work against the quality of the fishery.

I have fished Little Bitterroot Lake extensively throughout my life and have watched this fishery change over time. Historically, the kokanee were primarily plankton feeders. Over time, a portion of the population learned to utilize Mysis shrimp in deep water, and those fish exhibited exceptional growth, with kokanee measuring 18–20 inches becoming a regular part of the catch. At that time, the district standard harvest regulation was in place, and exceptionally large fish were present at lower abundance. The regulation was later changed to allow only two kokanee over 12 inches within the 20-fish daily limit. Since that restriction was implemented, the number of kokanee utilizing Mysis appears to have increased substantially, while



their average size has declined. Today, mature fish in the 12- to 14-inch range are common and fish exceeding 20 inches are rare. If excessive angler harvest were simply removing the largest fish, I would expect fewer large fish but would still expect to occasionally see exceptionally large individuals that escaped harvest. Instead, the entire size distribution of mature Mysis-feeding kokanee appears to have shifted downward. That pattern is much more consistent with reduced growth associated with increasing fish density and competition for a finite food resource.

That pattern is consistent with well-established density-dependent growth in kokanee. As abundance increases relative to available forage, growth slows and fish mature at smaller sizes. In Little Bitterroot Lake, that relationship may be especially important because the exceptional growth historically observed appears to have been tied to Mysis as a high-quality food source. As more kokanee utilize that resource, the amount of forage available per fish may decline.

For that reason, I do not believe the management objective should simply be to maximize the number of mature kokanee. The goal should be to maintain a sustainable brood source while preserving the unique size structure and recreational opportunity this lake has historically provided.

Proposal 14 is intended to prevent a future problem, but no information has been presented showing that the existing 20-fish limit is currently causing excessive exploitation, limiting spawning abundance, or preventing FWP from meeting broodstock needs. Meanwhile, there is already an observable trend toward greater abundance and smaller fish.

I therefore support retaining the existing 20-fish daily limit and recommend that FWP increase monitoring as Little Bitterroot becomes a more important brood source. That monitoring should include kokanee abundance, age and size structure, spawning abundance, angler harvest, brood collection, and, importantly, the food base, including Mysis and zooplankton abundance.

Another potential unintended consequence of reducing the daily limit is increased high-grading of the catch. My concern is not with harvest itself; in fact, maintaining adequate harvest may be important to keep kokanee density in balance with the available food supply and promote better growth. The concern is that a lower daily limit could change angler behavior by encouraging anglers to release smaller kokanee while continuing to fish in hopes of keeping larger individuals. Because kokanee can experience substantial mortality after capture and release, particularly when taken from deep water, this could reduce total harvest while still imposing additional mortality on smaller fish and concentrating retained harvest on the largest fish in the population. A regulation intended to protect kokanee abundance could therefore unintentionally reduce the effectiveness of harvest as a density-management tool while increasing selective pressure on the larger fish we are trying to restore.



If future monitoring shows that angler harvest and brood collection are driving the population downward or threatening the Department's ability to meet egg-collection goals, I would be the first to propose an amendment reducing harvest. Until that occurs, I believe the better approach is to manage the fishery based on observed biological conditions rather than restrict harvest in anticipation of a problem that has not yet developed.

Department Response:

FWP continues to support our proposed 2027 fishing regulation change (#14). Many kokanee fisheries throughout the state are dependent on the annual egg take in Region 1. Poor egg quality from Lake Mary Ronan in recent years has resulted in stocking shortages. This issue at LMR is likely to continue increasing our reliance on Little Bitterroot Lake. The kokanee population in Little Bitterroot is dependent on wild reproduction. Removing over 1,000 mature females from the population annually will likely impact the population. This impact could be mitigated by reducing harvest limits as proposed by the department. This impact could also be mitigated by increased stocking at Little Bitterroot; however, kokanee are in short supply and increasing stocking would result in fewer fish that are available current or additional stocking requests.

FWP could continue to evaluate the kokanee population without implementing the proposed regulation change; however, the current FWP proposed regulation is a conservative approach to ensure FWP's kokanee stocking requests remain a priority. To ensure the kokanee population continues to thrive, FWP intends to continue annual spring gill net monitoring and increase winter ice fishing angler surveys.

COMMISSION