



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 #4- 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 Flathead Lake Regulations as follows:

- *Catch-and-release for cutthroat trout.*
- *Lake trout: ~~100 daily and in possession~~ **20 daily and 40 in possession**, only 1 over 36 inches, and all fish ~~30~~ **26** to 36 inches must be released.*
- *Yellow perch: no limit, only 10 daily over 10 inches. No possession limit.*
- *Northern pike: no limit. **(Retain Western District Standard Limit)***
- *Rainbow trout: no limit. **(Retain Western District Standard Limit)***
- *Smallmouth bass: no limit. **(Retain Western District Standard Limit)***
- ***Kokanee Salmon: 5 daily and 10 in possession.***
- *NOTE: A Flathead Indian Reservation Tribal Permit is required to fish on the southern portion of the lake. Check Tribal Fishing regulations for the south portion of the lake.*

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

Rationale and Background: Flathead Lake has a long and complicated fisheries history. There are decisions that, with the benefit of hindsight, we would likely make differently. We cannot change those decisions or recreate the lake as it existed generations ago. We can, however, honestly evaluate where the fishery stands today and make deliberate choices about what we want it to become.

This amendment is largely a response to the lack of specificity in the proposed Statewide Fisheries Management Plan regarding the future of Flathead Lake. The plan describes the history of the fishery and identifies native-fish conservation and nonnative-fish suppression as management priorities, but it does



not clearly define the desired future condition of the lake. It provides no measurable lake trout population objective, desired size structure, acceptable level of bull trout bycatch associated with suppression activities, or decision points at which the present strategy would be modified. It also does not explain what future recreational opportunity is intended to remain after continued suppression.

Flathead Lake is jointly managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The original Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan was developed through an extensive public process and established three complementary goals: protect and increase native trout, balance native-fish conservation with the maintenance of a viable recreational fishery, and protect the lake's exceptional water quality and habitat. It called for adaptive management, annual public reporting, and periodic reassessment as new information became available. It also specifically described the intended lake trout fishery as one with fewer but larger fish and directed managers to reduce smaller lake trout while maintaining and enhancing the trophy component of the fishery.

That balance has increasingly been lost. Northwest Montana remains one of the last strongholds for native bull trout and genetically unaltered westslope cutthroat trout. Protecting those populations is an important responsibility, and this amendment does not retreat from it. However, native-fish protection has also resulted in substantial restrictions on angling opportunity and an increasingly intensive lake trout suppression program. Those tradeoffs would be easier to support if they were producing a clear and measurable native-fish response.

The Department's proposed management plan states plainly that bull trout have not responded to the high lake trout harvest rates. The most recent available CSKT suppression report similarly concludes that bull trout abundance remains low but fairly stable, with some encouraging increases in individual North Fork tributaries but no overall upward trend. Stability may represent an important conservation success when compared with continued decline, but after more than two decades of active suppression, and full-scale gill-net suppression since 2014, it is also reasonable to ask whether the current strategy can achieve more than stability and whether its costs to the recreational fishery remain proportional to its demonstrated benefits.

The suppression program has unquestionably changed the lake trout population. CSKT's reporting concludes that adult lake trout abundance has declined sufficiently to produce biological changes. The same report documents that the average length of lake trout submitted during both spring and fall Mack Days has trended downward since 2010. It also reports that lake trout under 300 millimeters peaked in 2023, likely reflecting a compensatory increase in recruitment in response to exploitation. The report recognizes the possibility that increased catch rates among successful anglers may partly reflect greater



juvenile abundance resulting from overexploitation, while also cautioning that improved technology and angler efficiency complicate that interpretation.

The Mack Days records provide additional reason to examine this issue carefully. From 2012 through 2024, the available annual tournament totals generally ranged from approximately 38,000 to 52,000 lake trout. In 2025, Mack Days anglers removed approximately 79,000 fish. Those totals are not a standardized population estimate and should not be presented as proof that lake trout abundance is increasing. Nevertheless, the combination of very high removals, declining average fish length, and evidence of compensatory recruitment raises a legitimate question: are we creating a lake trout population increasingly dominated by abundant small fish while steadily diminishing the larger fish that once supported a world-class recreational fishery?

Lake trout cannibalism is also part of this discussion, although its population-level effect under current conditions has not been adequately quantified. Earlier Flathead Lake food-web research documented cannibalism across several lake trout size classes and found it was greatest among fish approximately 20 to 25 inches long. That does not establish that protecting larger lake trout alone will control juvenile abundance, and large lake trout also consume native fish. It does demonstrate that the relationship between predator size structure, recruitment, and native-fish predation is more complicated than simply assuming that removing every available lake trout produces the greatest overall benefit.

Other western states have demonstrated that native- or forage-fish objectives do not necessarily require abandoning a quality lake trout fishery. At Payette Lake, Idaho Fish and Game uses size-selective netting to target juvenile lake trout while releasing larger fish. That program is paired with kokanee stocking, river imprinting, tagging, creel surveys, spawner monitoring, and regular public reporting. Idaho's stated objective is to maintain a healthy kokanee population while preserving a world-class trophy lake trout fishery. Flathead Lake is a different and more complicated ecosystem, and the Payette strategy cannot simply be copied. It does show, however, that suppression can be selective, adaptive, and expressly designed to preserve meaningful recreational opportunity.

Reestablishing kokanee in Flathead Lake should also be reconsidered as part of a broader evaluation. Previous efforts stocked millions of kokanee into Flathead Lake through multiple release locations, fish sizes, and stocking strategies, but failed because survival was inadequate and lake trout predation remained too high. Those results should not be ignored. At the same time, lake trout abundance and age structure have now been altered by years of suppression, hatchery and imprinting methods have advanced, and mature kokanee continue to be occasionally observed in the system.



Rather than simply concluding that restoration is infeasible, the Department should outline what a renewed kokanee restoration effort would require, the likely biological and operational roadblocks, the cost, and the conditions under which a pilot could be attempted. If funding or hatchery capacity is a limiting factor, the Department and Legislature should consider whether a dedicated coldwater fisheries stamp, modeled after Montana's warmwater stamp, could help fund expanded coldwater hatchery capacity and restoration work. Historically, kokanee were an important forage resource for bull trout, and their reestablishment could provide a meaningful benefit to a native species that continues to struggle in the Flathead Lake system. Restoring kokanee would be difficult and would require clear biological objectives, monitoring, and stopping points, but it is an opportunity worth seriously pursuing.

Lake Trout: Reducing the daily lake trout limit from 100 fish to 20 would still leave a liberal harvest limit, consistent with district standards, and would not meaningfully restrict the overwhelming majority of anglers. Expanding the protected slot from 30–36 inches to 26–36 inches would begin rebuilding the larger-fish component of the population and provide more fish an opportunity to reach the trophy size classes that historically distinguished Flathead Lake. Retaining the allowance for one fish over 36 inches would preserve limited harvest opportunity while continuing to protect most large fish. This is not a proposal to end lake trout management; it is an interim adjustment intended to restore greater balance while FWP and CSKT undertake a transparent, public evaluation of the lake's future.

Northern Pike, Rainbow, Smallmouth Bass: For the same reason, the proposed unlimited harvest regulations for northern pike, rainbow trout, and smallmouth bass should not be adopted. The Department acknowledges that few anglers currently reach the existing limits and that measurable population changes are unlikely. If removing the limits is not expected to produce a measurable biological result, the change is principally symbolic. Regulatory consistency between the north and south halves of the lake is desirable, but consistency alone does not justify regulations that alienate anglers without advancing a defined fisheries objective.

Kokanee Salmon: Kokanee are beginning to reappear in Flathead Lake in small numbers. Whether those fish originate from Swan Lake, Lake McDonald, or another source is not yet known, but reducing the daily limit to five would provide a more conservative foundation for potential natural reestablishment and future restoration efforts.

The people asking for this discussion are not opposing native-fish conservation. To the contrary, they are deeply committed to preserving native fish and want to ensure that the current strategy is actually accomplishing that goal. They are asking what measurable outcomes continued suppression is expected to produce, how success or failure will be determined, what level of recreational opportunity will remain, and when the management strategy will be reconsidered if bull trout do not show a meaningful response.



If the proposed Statewide Fisheries Management Plan is not revised to answer those questions, this amendment establishes a reasonable management direction in the interim. It continues substantial harvest of smaller lake trout, begins restoring part of the fishery's depleted size structure, retains existing limits on other sport fish where no biological benefit from unlimited harvest has been demonstrated, and creates the opportunity for a serious, transparent, and collaborative conversation about the future of Flathead Lake.

Department Response:

Current lake trout regulations on Flathead Lake are intended to benefit the lake trout fishery. Abundant spawning habitat and high reproductive success has resulted in a large, overpopulated lake trout population. Intraspecific competition is high and likely limiting growth rates. Liberal harvest limits of smaller lake trout and regulations to protect fish over 30 inches are intended to reduce intraspecific competition, improving growth rates and fish condition. Reducing harvest pressure on lake trout would result in increased competition among individuals. Catch rates for lake trout during fall gill net monitoring surveys have declined slightly in recent years and fish condition appears to be improving. This indicates that the current management strategy is working. However, catch rates of the most abundant, smaller size-classes of lake trout in monitoring surveys remain high and anglers continue to harvest limits of 100 lake trout regularly in the Mack Days Fishing Tournaments. Most of the catch during the tournament is small lake trout and the removal of the smaller fish could result in more desirable lake trout size structure through density dependent growth response. Reducing the most abundant size classes of lake trout is also intended to limit negative impacts to bull trout. This strategy has helped bull trout abundance remain stable for the past 25 years.

FWP comanages FHL cooperatively with the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). It is the goal of both agencies to have consistent lake-wide regulations. Numerous anglers have also expressed their interest in simplified, consistent lake-wide regulations. In 2025, CSKT changed their FHL lake trout regulations to match FWP's. This was a substantial change that will positively impact the recreational lake trout fishery. In addition to protecting large fish from angler harvest, the tribe is also releasing lake trout over 30 inches from their suppression nets. This is a commitment to achieving our goal of consistent lake-wide fishing regulations. FWP and CSKT have also worked cooperatively on yellow perch and lake whitefish regulations to improve those fisheries. FWP's proposal to change northern pike and smallmouth bass regulations to match CSKTs would not likely impact that status of these illegally introduced fish species in the lake. Rainbow trout are rare in Flathead Lake and would also not be affected by the proposed regulation changes. These changes would achieve consistent, simplified lake-wide fishing regulations.

The FWP proposed fishing regulation changes (FWP Proposals 9-11) are consistent with current fisheries-management objectives, including maintaining a quality recreational lake trout fishery, reducing abundance of smaller lake trout, protecting larger fish, and simplifying regulations across the lake. However, comments received during public meetings and the regulation-review process demonstrate a strong public interest in maintaining and enhancing diverse



recreational fishing opportunities throughout the Flathead drainage. In response, FWP will continue to work with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, anglers, guides, and other interested partners to identify opportunities to enhance recreational fisheries and to evaluate the biological, operational, and financial feasibility of future kokanee recovery or restoration efforts in Flathead Lake. This evaluation would need to consider the factors that limited previous restoration attempts, including survival, predation, available hatchery capacity, monitoring needs, and consistency with native-fish conservation objectives. Because this work will require additional evaluation and coordination, the Department is committed to further assessing the overall Flathead Lake fishery, both native and recreational species, now and into the future. At this time, we continue to support adopting the current FWP proposed fishing regulations changes for Flathead Lake.

