

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

Natural Resources Department

Division of Fish, Wildlife, Recreation & Conservation

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Tribal Council Recommends a Preferred Alternative

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) have recommended a preferred alternative for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS): *Proposed Strategies to Benefit Native Species by Reducing the Abundance of Lake Trout in Flathead Lake, Montana.*

The DEIS evaluated the implementation of methods outlined in the Flathead Lake and River System Co-Management Plan (Co-plan) for non-native lake trout suppression. It presented four alternatives with differing degrees of lake trout population reduction and for each alternative, examined the potential benefits to native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout as well as the biological, social, and economic impacts. The DEIS remains available online for informational purposes at mackdays.com.

The recommendation of the preferred alternative is the culmination of more than three years of careful analysis of current fisheries research, scientific study, and broad public scoping and comment periods, including a series of community meetings. State and federal agencies with fisheries expertise in the Flathead watershed and several renowned scientists participated in the development of the findings in the DEIS. Each alternative is designed to implement measures that increase the number of native fish in Flathead Lake and River while maintaining a recreational fishery. Alternative D is recommended as the preferred alternative.

This recommendation is consistent with direction given to the CSKT and the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission by the Flathead Reservation Fish and Wildlife Board (Board) in a letter dated September 9, 2013. The Board is made up of seven members representing the tribal and non-tribal communities and is appointed by the Tribal Chairman and the Governor. The Board has overseen this process since the adoption of the Co-Plan in 2000 and has urged that the co-managers fully implement the Co-Plan. Both public and agency comments received on the DEIS overwhelmingly favored the use of additional tools to reduce non-native lake trout abundance.

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Alternative D provides the greatest flexibility in Flathead Lake fisheries management. The selection of this alternative does not obligate the harvest of a specific number of lake trout annually, but it rather determines that the impacts of doing so have been fully quantified. Alternative D analyzes the effects of a maximum 75% reduction of the adult lake trout population, although this target level will not be pursued unless needed. The specifics of the alternative, including timing, techniques, and personnel will be identified subsequently in a detailed implementation plan. Most importantly, the preferred alternative allows flexibility for managers as circumstances change and new information is obtained.

The public will have another opportunity to comment when the Bureau of Indian Affairs publishes the notice of availability for the Final EIS. A record of decision (ROD) will follow that comment period, and then the CSKT will begin working with co-managers, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies in the development of an implementation plan. The implementation of an adaptive management plan will ultimately guide which of the newly available suppression methods have the least by-catch of other fish species and are most compatible with the existing angler-based approaches used to balance the fishery as envisioned by the co-plan. As in the past, annual monitoring and reporting of progress under the co-plan goals will ultimately decide the level of improvement to native trout populations and the best balance for a recreational fishery.

For more information contact Tom McDonald or Germaine White at Division of Fish, Wildlife, Recreation or Conservation at 883-2888.

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