

ODFW Test-Drops Larger Trout in Eagle Cap Mountain Lakes

Larger trout may better survive high lake conditions

Thousands of juvenile trout were airlifted to the Wallowa Mountains recently by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to supplement the fish populations of lakes within the 361,000-acre Eagle Cap Wilderness in Northeast Oregon.

The Eagle Cap Wilderness has some of Oregon's most beautiful mountain lakes, including the state's highest lake, Legore Lake, perched above the Wallowa Valley at an altitude of 8,950 feet. More than 40 lakes in the Eagle Cap are above 7,000 feet.

"The extreme conditions involved in maintaining healthy fish populations in a landscape above 7,000 feet has its own challenges," said Jeff Yanke, ODFW district fish biologist in Enterprise, adding, "but anglers have consistently told us that fishing is one of the recreational experiences they expect when they go to the wilderness."

ODFW stocks Eagle Cap Wilderness lakes by helicopter every two years. The stocking program is paid for with federal Sportfish Restoration

Program dollars, which is funded by a 10 percent excise tax on the sale of fishing equipment. In this way, ODFW seeds off-the-beaten-track lakes with rainbow trout that will hopefully grow to become the eight inchers that anglers can legally retain.

The challenges juvenile trout face in the high mountains are considerable. First there is the long fall from the aerial stocking device (ASD) or "shuttle" underneath the helicopter to the cold waters of the high lake. In some of those lakes, the rainbows may encounter eastern brook trout, which were stocked in the high lakes decades ago and are a voracious predator. Freezing cold water is another factor in the high lakes that can take a toll on fish.

One way to improve survival rates is to start with larger fish. Fish biologists have long known larger fish are better able to withstand the forces of nature than smaller fish. However, larger fish also take up more space, which means fewer of them will fit into the two-gallon containers on the helicopter shuttle that ODFW uses to transport fish to the high lakes.

This year ODFW's Enterprise

office began testing three sizes of rainbow trout to see which one may fare better with the presence of brook trout in Oregon's highest lakes. The control group, raised to a target size of 2.5 inches, is similar to what ODFW has released into the high lakes in the past and most commonly used for aerial stocking in other locations. This year two larger sizes: 3- and 4-inch rainbows – were also tested to see if there is any improvement in survival rates as the result of using larger trout. This part of the study will be completed in three to four years.

"Our study was initiated to see if we could increase rainbow survival in our lakes enough by raising a larger fish to overcome predation and competition by naturally producing brook trout," said Kyle Bratcher, ODFW assistant district fish biologist in Enterprise.

One of the concerns was that larger fish might suffer more severe

injuries when they hit the water after a 70-foot free fall because their bodies have more surface area to injure. Finding little or no documented evidence of this, the biologists simulated an air stocking event by dropping these different groups from varying heights into a small reservoir in advance.

Preliminary results indicate that all three size groups have high post-drop survival rates, according to Bratcher, who noted that samples were sent to ODFW's fish lab in La Grande where they will be assessed for bruising, injuries and other signs of trauma.

In addition, ODFW crews will sample survey the stocked lakes two years from now, with captured fish identified as to species, length, weight, and other criteria that will lead to estimates of population abundance, growth, and condition.

ODFW Commission Adopts 2018 Sport Fishing Regulations

The Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted 2018 sport fishing regulations at its meeting in Salem. Some of the changes anglers will see next year include:

- Anglers with a two-rod endorsement will be able to use up to five rods when ice fishing (statewide).
- There will be additional opportunity for retention of hatchery spring Chinook from January 1-July 31 in some NW Zone streams including the Wilson, Trask, Nestucca, Kilchis River(s).
- No bag or size limits for bass in the lower Deschutes River.
- Change in the kokanee bonus daily bag limit in Wickiup Reservoir and Lake Billy Chinook to 5 kokanee per day in addition to the daily trout limit (so anglers can take up to 10 kokanee per day).

The Commission was also briefed on a draft updated Cougar Man-

agement Plan and heard public testimony about it. The Plan to guide management of cougars was last updated in 2006. The current draft Plan does not propose major management changes. It does incorporate more scientific literature and Oregon-specific research about cougars, including a genetics and habitat analysis. The updated Plan will continue to stress coexistence with Oregon's more than 6,000 cougars.

The Commission approved grant funds for nine Restoration and Enhancement Projects to improve angler access or facilities, or enhance fisheries, and appointed John Breese of Prineville, OR as the Landowner Representative to the Access and Habitat Board.

The Commission is the policy making body for fish and wildlife issues in Oregon. Its next meeting is September 14-15 in Welches, OR.

Vernonia School Board Meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month. The next School Board Meeting is scheduled for September 14 at 6:00 pm in the Schools Library.

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