



## Comments and Considerations from the Priest River Watershed Group for the Development of the 2025-2027 Panhandle Region Seasons and Rules

The Priest River Watershed Group (PRWG) is a local collaborative of diverse interests committed to protecting, maintaining, and improving the health and integrity of the Priest River watershed. To learn more about the PRWG and view the steering committee membership please visit [www.priestriverwg.org](http://www.priestriverwg.org). We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments and considerations for the development of the Idaho Fishing 2025 - 2027 Panhandle Region Seasons and Rules. Our comments will be focused on the seasons and rules directly affecting **Upper Priest Lake and tributaries, Priest Lake and tributaries, Priest River and tributaries and East River and tributaries**. The following discussion will represent the language we are suggesting for the “Special Rule Waters for the Panhandle Region” section of the draft *Idaho Fishing 2025 – 2027 Seasons and Rules* document. We feel these suggestions are reasonable, simple to understand, enforceable, and will benefit the native fish species in the watershed while still allowing anglers to enjoy these public resources.

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### Upper Priest Lake and Tributaries:

#### **Upper Priest Lake and tributaries:** (current language)

- Trout limit is 6, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout
- No Limit on Lake Trout
- Kokanee limit is 6

#### **Upper Priest Lake and tributaries:** (suggested language)

- Trout limit is 6, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout or any trout with a red or orange slash below jaw
- No Limit on Lake Trout or Bass (Largemouth and Smallmouth)
- Kokanee limit is 6

### *Justification –*

The PRWG discussed the proposal by IDFG to allow harvest of Westslope Cutthroat Trout in Priest and Upper Priest Lakes and we are not comfortable moving to a harvest-based Cutthroat Trout fishery in the lakes. A “moderately abundant” Cutthroat Trout population does not instill confidence in the group that

we are ready to allow harvest of this species, particularly when the densities of Westslope Cutthroat Trout are quite low in several tributaries and, particularly, Lower Priest River. The Cutthroat Trout populations in the lakes, especially Upper Priest Lake, have the potential to act as a source, or meta, population for this species and provide an opportunity for natural movement and recruitment to other waters in the watershed where Cutthroat populations are struggling. We are hesitant to support any regulations that could impact this native species when it is already depressed in other connected waters in the basin.

We would like to see the language included that helps anglers identify when they have caught a Cutthroat Trout and therefore should be released. By adding "...or any trout with a red or orange slash below the jaw", the extra description would be consistent with the regulations for the Coeur d'Alene and St. Joe Rivers and reduces the chances that a Cutthroat Trout be unintentionally harvested.

Bass distribution is expanding throughout the Priest River watershed and it should be encouraged to remove as many of these non-native species as we can. The impacts these species (Smallmouth and Largemouth Bass) can have on native fish populations has been well documented. Reducing their numbers will benefit native minnow species, Westslope Cutthroat Trout, and Bull Trout. The general regulations for the Panhandle Region have a limit of 6 bass but we would like you to consider removing that limit in the Priest River watershed and list a no limit on bass regulation for Upper Priest Lake and tributaries.

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## **Priest Lake and Tributaries:**

### **Priest Lake and tributaries:** (current language)

- Trout limit is 6, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout
- Kokanee limit is 6

### **Priest Lake and tributaries:** (suggested language)

- Trout limit is 6, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout or any trout with a red or orange slash below jaw
- Kokanee limit is 6
- No Limit on Lake Trout or Bass (Largemouth and Smallmouth)

### ***Justification –***

See previous explanation for adding "...or any trout with a red or orange slash below the jaw".

See previous explanation for specifically mentioning bass and placing a no limit harvest on these species.

We would like to see IDFG support the control of Lake Trout not only in Upper Priest Lake, but in Priest Lake, as well. We feel there should be no limit on the amount of Lake Trout harvest in Priest Lake and this should be clearly defined under the Special Rule Waters section for Priest Lake and tributaries. The

impacts this non-native species can, and has had, on Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout in the watershed warrants any viable suppression efforts available to management.

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### **Priest River and Tributaries:**

**Priest River and tributaries:** (current language)

- Trout limit is 6, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout

**Priest River and tributaries:** (suggested language)

- Trout limit is 2, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout or any trout with a red or orange slash below jaw
- No limit on Bass (Smallmouth and Largemouth)

#### ***Justification –***

The PRWG supports a well-managed recreational fishery on the Priest River, but trout in the lower river face challenging habitat conditions which are likely contributing to the very low densities of Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Rainbow Trout, and Brown Trout. While we engage with other agencies, land managers, and private landowners to address these existing habitat concerns, we'd like to propose IDFG extend some special regulations to these target species to help insure we can maintain the best possible recreational fishery in the Priest River. We are not sure how much harvest of Rainbow Trout and Brown Trout currently occurs in the river, but we feel a 6 fish harvest limit on rainbows and browns has the potential to further depress these populations, especially as we see recreational use on the river increase. We believe reducing the harvest limit from 6 Trout to 2 Trout, while maintaining catch and release for Westslope Cutthroat Trout, would be a proactive measure that mimics management actions on other area streams that are supporting lower densities of these target species. Examples of the streams in the Panhandle Region that apply a 2 Trout limit include Clearwater River, Little North Fork Clearwater, Kootenai River, Moyie River, Spokane River, and St. Maries River. We are strongly encouraging IDFG to adopt this modification to the harvest limits on the Priest River and tributaries.

See previous explanations for adding "...or any trout with a red or orange slash below the jaw".

See previous explanation for specifically mentioning bass and placing a no limit harvest on these species.

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### **East River and Tributaries:**

**East River and tributaries** (suggested language)

- Closed to all fishing from September 1 through October 31

- Trout limit is 2, no harvest of Cutthroat Trout or any trout with a red or orange slash below jaw

***Justification-***

Finally, the PRWG would like to encourage IDFG to add the **East River and tributaries** to the list of Special Rule Waters for the Panhandle Region. The East River and some of its tributaries are the greatest source of adequate spawning habitat for the unique segment of the Lake Pend Oreille Bull Trout population that first migrates downstream in the Pend Oreille River, then up the Lower Priest River, and into the East River to spawn. Because the East River is the primary spawning tributary for these Bull Trout, and because redd surveys indicate very low numbers of Bull Trout continue to spawn there, we feel it would be reasonable to provide a little extra protection for these spawning fish through the use of a seasonal fishing closure. Complete closures are already being used to protect bull trout on several spawning tributaries of Lake Pend Oreille (*i.e.* Trestle Creek, Granite Creek, North and South Gold Creek) so we feel a seasonal closer would be appropriate to extend this protection to the East River and tributaries. This rule should eliminate catch by rod and reel while Bull Trout are spawning and thus reduce the chances of unintentional mortality, which can occur even when fish are released.

Thank you for considering our comments on the Development of the 2025-2027 Panhandle Region Fisheries Seasons and Rules. We look forward to reviewing the proposed document later this year.

The Priest River Watershed Group