



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

4/7/2023

Agenda item:

Lake Whatcom Rule Change Petition- (Decision)

Presenter(s):

Edward Eleazer, Region 4 Fish Program Manager

Background summary:

On February 2, 2023, the Department of Fish and Wildlife received a petition requesting the WDFW Commission to open a retention season for cutthroat trout on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham and allow the use of two fishing poles when fishing.

Lake Whatcom Coastal Cutthroat Trout History

The Coastal cutthroat trout in Lake Whatcom are resident with spawning occurring in several inlet streams to the lake (figure 1). Coastal cutthroat trout in the lake are depressed by anthropogenic impacts from historical logging and development. Extensive logging through the 1980s stripped slopes and riparian areas degrading spawning habitats and leading to rapid declines in abundance. The Department enacted protections through the 1990s to reduce fishery exploitation and eventually eliminated harvest in 1999. The Department supplemented the population with a captive Coastal cutthroat trout strain originally derived from Lake Whatcom stock through 2001. Periodic spawning surveys indicated that the population continued to persist at low abundance through 1999. More recent spawning assessments in 2002 and 2006 indicated that the population was increasing, but not determined to be “recovered” as anthropogenic impacts have continued as residential development expanded throughout the basin. Anecdotal reports from local anglers indicate that cutthroat continue to persist and may be recruiting to the fishery more frequently, however, fishery catch is not a reliable tool to assess abundance. To date, the Department has been unable to repeat spawner monitoring efforts due to limited funds and competing priorities.

Two-pole

Two-pole fishing essentially allows an angler to double their fishing effort during their trip. The Department has not permitted the use of two poles in Lake Whatcom due to concerns for increased exploitation and bycatch of Coastal cutthroat trout in Lake Whatcom.

Staff recommendation:

Deny the petition to amend sports fishing rules to open a retention season for cutthroat trout and allow the use of two poles on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham. A lack of understanding of the status of the population, variability over time to assess resiliency, and the paucity of estimates of fishery effort and bycatch of cutthroat trout prevent the Department from recommending that this fishery be reopened or that two-poles be permitted.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

Pursuant to RCW 34.05.330

Option A) deny the petition in writing, stating the reasons for the denial comments specifically addressing the concerns raised by the petitioners, Or

Option B) initiate rulemaking for the proposal to change the sports fishing rules to open a season for cutthroat trout on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham and allow for the two-pole fishing.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

No fiscal impact to the agency

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

None

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Department staff recommend the Commission deny the petition to amend sports fishing rules to open a retention season for cutthroat trout and allow the use of two poles on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham.

Draft motion language:

Option A (preferred) Motion: I move to deny the petition to amend sports fishing rules to open a retention season for cutthroat trout and allow the use of two poles on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham.

Is there a “second”?

If so, then motion maker states the basis for the motion; other Commissioners discuss views on motion; amendments, if any, proposed and addressed.

Option B Motion: I move to accept the petition and direct the Department to initiate rule-making to amend sports fishing rules to open a retention season for cutthroat trout and allow the use of two poles on Lake Whatcom near Bellingham.

Is there a “second”?

If so, then motion maker states the basis for the motion; other Commissioners discuss views on motion; amendments, if any, proposed and addressed.

Note: If the Commission desires to separate the petition into two separate parts for purposes of motion practice, one being the two-pole endorsement, the other being retention season for cutthroat trout, it is free to do so, but the staff recommendation is to deny both components.

Post decision communications plan:

Commission staff will provide a letter to the petitioners with the final outcome of the Commission decision regarding the petition.



FIGURE 1. Lake Whatcom is located east of the city of Bellingham and south of the Canadian border in Washington State.