

Idaho hikes bag limits on wolves

By ERIC BARKER of the Tribune | Posted: Friday, March 23, 2012 12:00 am

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission raised the bag limit on wolves and set spring chinook fishing seasons at its meeting in Boise Thursday.

Commissioners approved a department proposal to raise the wolf hunting bag limit to five per calendar year, and the trapping limit to five per season in the Panhandle and Clearwater regions. But the commission also decided to extend the higher bag limits to hunters and trappers in the Middle Fork Zone.

Jeff Gould, chief of the Idaho Fish and Game Department's wildlife bureau said earlier this week, the goal of the higher bag limits is to allow skilled hunters and trappers to help the state achieve its goal of shrinking wolf numbers, reducing predation on elk herds and lessen conflicts with livestock. He said allowing more wolves to be killed will reduce the population but not put it in jeopardy.

"The experiences in Canada and Alaska and our first two seasons is these regulations won't put our wolf populations at risk," Gould said.

There were more than 1,000 wolves in Idaho prior to the start of the 2011 hunting season. A population survey compiled by the Nez Perce Tribe and IDFG estimated there were at least 746 wolves in the state at the end of the year. Since that time, hunters and trappers have taken about 145 wolves, one died from parvovirus, and 14 were killed in a state-sponsored control action, reducing the minimum population estimate to about 586. Wolf hunting and trapping closes in most of the state March 31, but the hunting season in the Lolo and Selway zones runs through June.

Commissioners also approved a spring chinook fishing season on the Clearwater River, its North and South forks, the Lochsa River, Snake River in Hells Canyon and the lower Salmon and Little Salmon rivers. Fishing will open April 22. The bag limit on most of the rivers will be four chinook per day, with no more than two being adults. The short section of the North Fork of the Clearwater River will have an adult limit of just one.

Joe DuPont, regional fish manager for the department at Lewiston, said the lower adult bag limit on the North Fork is designed to extend the fishing season there. The department came up with a handful of ideas to make that happen and most anglers at public meetings earlier this month supported the smaller bag limit.

"The anglers here really understand how these fisheries are operated and how different rule changes can influence them. They say 'I'm willing to put restrictions on myself so I can have benefits in the long run,' " he said.

Fisheries managers like DuPont expect more than 83,000 adult, hatchery-born spring chinook to return at least as far as Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River. Although fishing opens April 22, DuPont said the chinook run is looking like it will be late this year, as it has been in recent years.

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