

# OUTDOORS

## Money is being spent to both save, wipe out lake trout



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III**

Fishermen are being asked to spend money to kill something they love.

Last week the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks issued an environmental assessment asking for public comment on a proposal to eradicate lake trout in Swan Lake.

Lake trout, with a scientific name of *Salvelinus namaycush*, is a highly esteemed wild fish that many fishermen love to pursue, catch and eat. Lake trout meet all the standards of most fishermen. They are challenging to catch, they are strong fighters

and smaller fish are great table fare.

What makes lake trout especially attractive to fishermen is their size. They can grow to immense size, up to four feet long and more than 100 pounds.

In Montana, the state record is a huge 42-pounder. Each year several 25- to 40-pound lake trout are caught in local lakes.

Fishermen know a new state record is swimming in one of our local lakes and it may be their next bite.

In the Great Lakes, lake trout are native. But their natural populations were decimated by pollution, commercial fishing and the parasitic sea lamprey.

Over the past 30 years, the U.S. government and state governments have spent hundreds of millions of taxpayer money to restore that lake trout fishery.

Now fast forward to 2008 and 2009 and the Flathead. Here we are spending taxpayer and fishermen dollars to eradicate lake trout. Does this have a ring of government spending logic?

Last month, several hundred local citizens attended the annual meeting of the Flathead Electric Cooperative. Some folks were stunned to hear the co-op manager tell them that 30 percent of their electric bill was the result of money spent restoring wildlife and fish species.

The difference between here and the Great Lakes is one word — native. In the Great Lakes, the lake trout is a native fish and the federal Endangered Species Act requires they be restored, regardless of the cost. In the Flathead, lake trout are non-native. Since they threaten native species such as the bull trout, the lake trout must be eradicated.

Before going any further, I must vindicate my friends at Fish, Wildlife and Parks. They are doing only what federal law requires. If they don't take aggressive action against the lake trout in Swan Lake, they will likely be taken to court and forced to take action against the lake trout.

As a fisherman, I support government programs to build and sustain sport fishing. But I am concerned when my money is being spent to simply manipulate fish species. This is especially so when the resulting fishery may be less attractive to most fishermen.

Swan Lake has one of the strongest populations of bull trout in the Columbia River Basin. As we know, the bull trout is listed as a "threatened" species.

No one knows how lake trout got into Swan Lake. Was it bucket biology or did lake trout get up the old fish ladder on the Swan River dam?

Lake trout in Swan Lake were first noted in the late 1990s. Studies have indicated their population in Swan Lake is rapidly increasing.

History of similar problems in other lakes indicates that eventually lake trout may eliminate bull trout and also the popular kokanee fishery.

Fishery experts believe the current proposal to use gill nets to kill Swan Lake lake trout, especially spawning-size lake trout, will suppress the lake trout population, thereby protecting the bull trout.

The bad news is the projected cost to gill net these lake trout is \$50,000 to \$70,000 each year.

The really bad news is that gill netting never will eliminate all the lake trout. Since one lake trout can lay more than 1,000 eggs per year, gill netting will have to be a perpetual cost to maintain the Swan Lake bull trout fishery.

I wish I had an answer to the Swan Lake dilemma. I don't. But somehow our society needs to get past the horrendous and increasing cost of trying to restore our natural world to previous conditions.

We live in an area with great hunting and fishing opportunities. We have very clean air and some of the cleanest water in the world. Perhaps we have to learn to live with what we have.