Meeting Title: Big Wood River Working Group October Meeting
Date: October 14th , 2026
Time: 6:00 PM – 9:04 PM
Location / Platform: In-person, Community Campus-Bullion Room, Hailey Idaho
Facilitator: Matt Corsi, IDFG
Recorder: Tucker Brauer (IDFG)

Attendees: Mike Peterson (IDFG), Matt Corsi (IDFG), Tucker Brauer (IDFG), Lance Hebdon (IDFG), Braden Lensing (IDFG) Dirk Zondag Jr., James Harper, Ryan Santo, Kent Sanders, Ed Northen, Amanda Bauman, Bob Jost, Chad Chorney, Greg Cameron, Mike McKenna, Tim East

Absentees: none

Non-Member attendees: 3

- The meeting was called to order at 6:00 PM by M. Corsi after a quorum of eight members was reached. The Remaining three additional members arrived slightly late.
- M. Corsi welcomed attendees and took time to revisit discussions that took place up to this point, namely the fact that the proposal voted on at the last meeting could be advanced to the commission as it received a supermajority of member support (8/11 votes in favor). This meeting, however, was to try and reach a consensus on the proposal.
- Prior to discussing proposals and attempting to reach consensus, Corsi first opened the floor for members to share what discussions they have had with their constituencies about the working group's deliberations so far.
    - McKenna posed questions that he had received from others and was unable to answer himself. Is lack of habitat what is preventing fish from growing? IDFG responded that habitat is likely contributing to the effects observed, but densities are still believed to be the primary driver behind depressed growth rates. Densities will likely continue to be high even if habitat quality is improved.
    - Santo sent the proposals to local guides and other people in the valley. He said that 2 points were brought up by those he spoke to. 1) providing a catch and release season for spawning fish & 2) if the problem is small fish, why don't we just harvest more small fish? He also informed the group that the angling club 5B Anglers had sent him a letter stating support for the Working Groups efforts to reach a decision and they committed to help educate their members and the broader public about any changes that are ultimately adopted.
    - Northen spoke about the Working Group at the Trout Unlimited State Council meeting in McCall and at the Hemingway TU board meeting recently. At both meetings, the need for habitat improvement projects and the identification of what was driving the shift toward high fish densities was identified as the most important things to figure out. Discussions took place about whether TU fish resue efforts over the past 17 years may be contributing to the issue and whether those efforts should be curtailed in some way. Interest in managing the fishery as

a wild trout fishery was expressed, as was max size limits and bait restrictions. IDFG commented on its support for TU fish rescue efforts, however, they may ask that rescued fish be transported elsewhere going forward to not exacerbate density issues. That conversation was tabled until a later date.

- East spoke with multiple anglers and spoke highly of an employee from Project Big Wood with which he had a long conversation with. He thanked him for a good education from his perspective. The PBW employee did have some concern over the accuracy of creel survey effort estimates, saying that the level of uncertainty is likely higher than what the data represented (i.e., IDFG was underestimating angler effort in his opinion).
- Chorney spoke with friends and fellow guides at the Picabo Store and throughout the valley. Conversations centered around the fact that there is no smoking gun pointing towards why fishing quality is poor and it is a combination of factors contributing to the decreased quality. Some people he spoke to, including himself, are concerned that these changes won't move the needle in terms of fishing quality, but everyone he has spoken to is generally in support of the group's ideas to date. Corsi responded to this, stating it is reasonable to suggest these changes won't affect fishing quality, but the simplification of rules is a huge success in itself.
- Cameron spoke with 4 people and explained the group's mission, the data, and the group's ideas to date. 3 of them were highly supportive and one was adamantly against the changes. He speculated that person wouldn't change his mind no matter how much evidence supported the decision. HE also spoke to the commissions ability to change course "if we get it wrong, they can change it".
- Jost mentioned a conversation with an angler that didn't agree with the survey data. He stated that this angler catches large fish frequently and blamed the small fish problem on lack of food and changing hatches. He believed that a natural die-off would solve the issue instead of letting people harvest the fish. Further discussion of the effects of fire and insect populations was held from various members of the group.
- Northen asked IDFG the densities in the lower system weren't taken into consideration whether there would be concern for the rest of the system. IDFG stated that densities are elevated throughout the system and growth has decreased affected system-wide, not just in the lower section. Corsi added that Mortality and recruitment has not changed over time, but growth has. The problems observed would not be driven by a loss of fish or a change in mortality. This is a growth issue.
- East asked is insect populations have changed over time. Peterson state that data collected by Project Big Wood and Dept of Environmental Quality suggest invertebrate population size and diversity have remained stable over time.
- Baumann stated that the river has seen a 26% decrease in wetted width over 20 years and that suggests that large fish habitat has decreased with it. She asked if IDFG thought that we would see a positive population response if more habitat and more water were present in the river. IDFG stated yes, that would probably be expected.

- Corsi ended discussion to introduce the results of the homework assignment that asked members to identify proposals for compromise to reach a group consensus.
- Brauer shared the results of the homework. In general, 3 of 11 members believed the current proposal was sufficient and did not offer a proposal for compromise. The remaining 7 members formed proposals, and though details differed slightly between them, they could be distilled into two basic themes. Theme 1) Reduce the proposed bag limit of 4 fish/day while keeping year-round opportunity, single barbless hook restriction, and no other tackle restriction portions of the current proposal. 2 fish/day was the most common suggestion here. Theme 2) Implement a split regulation, wherein the river would be divided into two sections. The lower section would allow higher harvest, bait, and year-round opportunity. The upper section would allow less fish harvest than the lower section, not allow the use of bait, and allow year-round opportunity.
- Corsi asked the group to consider consensus in the room and consensus to the broader public. He also restated the current proposal that was on the table. For the entire upper BWR and its tributaries, 4 fish/day limit, no bait restriction, single barbless hook only. He stated that we should strive for consensus, but if it cannot be reached that it is ok.
- Harper asked for a re-vote on the proposal since the entire group was in the room for the first time to measure support for it. The group agreed and a vote was held.
    - Yay: Jost, Cameron, Chorney, Harper, Sanders, East, Santo, McKenna, Zondag Jr.
    - Nay: Baumann, Northen
    - Proposal passed 9-2 in favor
- Corsi asked the group what it would take to reach a unanimous vote. Consensus will carry more weight with the Commission if it can be attained.
    - East/Jost state they are open to ideas from the dissenting voters
    - Chorney states that his support does not mean he thinks the proposal is perfect but is a solid compromise that is good enough given their goals as a group.
    - Mckenna said he supports 4 fish harvest based on the data, but he thinks a 2 fish limit will be much easier to sell to the public. Jost agreed.
    - Baumann stated that a higher limit won't change behavior in the valley as catch and release is ingrained in the culture,
    - Santo states that the data supports higher harvest, but most of the public is likely unaware these discussions are even happening and will be hearing about all this for the first time when rules are proposed. The group needs to consider views outside the room and the shock that will likely happen as people hear about these proposed changes.
    - Zondag stated he has reached out to a lot of people and though some are shocked initially, once he explains the data they start to understand the need for changes. He states that he sees people avoiding the river due to quality declines, so much so that guides don't offer ½ day trips anymore because they don't want to take people on the Big Wood to catch small fish. He restates the need for change to positively affect the fishery and urged the group to consider the data and give it more weight than the social ramifications and backlash that some anticipate.
    - Northen responded by saying we need to put the fish first and ask whether these decisions are going to help the river. He believes the social aspect is much more important than others have suggested. He stated he would support a 2 fish limit

instead of a 4 fish limit. But he still had concerns that large fish would be removed from the system if harvest is allowed. Also, would support a split regulation allowing 4 fish below the East Fork and 2 fish/day above the East Fork.
    - Zondag asked Northen if he would support a 4 fish limit if it also restricted harvest of fish over 18" instead of 12" as he proposed. Northen said no that it allowed too many large fish to be taken and that it would take trophy opportunity from others. Zondag state that people don't really want to harvest those smaller fish, and that removing a large fish opens up a lot of resources for the next 4 or 5 smaller fish to grow quickly.
    - Harper stated that harvest is not a 1:1 effect. Taking a big fish has a disproportionate effect on growth of others. Big fish take up a lot of food and space, and in their absence, it allows a couple smaller fish to grow quickly. It won't take years to replace a large fish that is harvested, it will probably only take a month.
    - Northen asked IDFG if Zondag and Harpers statements were accurate. IDFG stated that in general, yes. Additionally, it's highly unlikely that all the big fish in question will be harvested from the Big Wood River. Even if a large fish is harvested, there is a 60% chance that that large fish will die anyways due to natural causes. Mortality, fishing-related or otherwise, is not what is limiting this population. What is limiting fishery quality is growth.
    - Sanders spoke to the importance of harvest in private ponds in Texas where he grew up. When ponds were stocked, fishing generally turned poor after about five years when most ponds would be filled with an overabundance of small largemouth bass. The remedy for this would be a harvest event in which neighbors and others would come and harvest large quantities of fish and have a fish dinner. Once hundreds of bass were removed over a period, he said that fish would start to grow again and they would start to catch bigger fish. He stated that we are in the same situation in the Big Wood River and harvest would likely fix the issues observed.
    - Northen restated his willingness to compromise with a river split of high/low harvest bait/no bait sections with the East Fork as the dividing line
    - Baumann added the proposal to include catch and release season that matches the instream work window that habitat projects must adhere to (i.e., no instream work from March 15th – July 15th) as a route of compromise.
    - Corsi asked Baumann if the spawning harvest closure just feels better even if we know that recruitment is not limited in the system. Baumann agreed that it was not biologically necessary but instead was an important awareness piece for the public to adhere to
- Corsi thanked the group for the great discussion so far on potential compromises. He asked for any dissenting views on the split regulation proposal brought forth by Northen and Baumann.
    - Sanders stated he thinks the catch and release protection for spawning didn't make sense because the river is usually too high to fish when they are spawning and self regulates any harvest that could occur. He states that fishing isn't having a negative effect as is, even though fishing is happening in the middle of the spawn currently.

    - Mckenna asked IDFG how long it would take to reverse a regulation decision if we opened harvest opportunity and had a worst-case scenario of too many fish being harvested. Hebdon responded that if faced with a catastrophic situation as described, IDFG has authority to change regulations at a moment's notice, referencing Salmon season closure that happen on a weekly basis and recent closures of the sturgeon fishery in the Middle Snake River.
    - The group discussed how much harvest we could realistically expect to occur. Brauer provided clarification on creel data that was shared previously and what IDFG believes that the maximum level of harvest that could be observed in the fishery is roughly 14%.
- Corsi Called for a break at 7:25 PM
- Meeting resumed at 7:40 PM
- Corsi acknowledged the small group of members with reasonable concerns about the changes discussed so far.
- Peterson made a point that the next survey of the BWR will occur in fall of 2027, only a couple months before new regulations would take effect. That means that IDFG will have a true zero state in which to compare how these changes affect the fishery in the future, if at all.
    - Zondag asked how long before we would consider rule changes again after these rules go into effect. Peterson stated it would not be overnight; we would want to continue to evaluate the fishery for at least a couple of regulation cycles before determining need for additional adjustment.
    - Peterson reminded the group that this is not a once in a lifetime opportunity to change rules on the Big Wood River. IDFG will continue to monitor this fishery and manage it adaptively.
    - Cameron asked the group to give credit to IDFG as this is their job and they do a good job at it. They will continue to manage this fishery appropriately.
    - Jost also asked the group to give credit to the work being done by the Big Wood River Land Trust and Project Big Wood.
    - Peterson told the group the importance of telling these stories to those not in the room.
- Zondag proposed that the group move forward with the current 9-2 vote and instead focus the remaining time on developing a plan to disseminate the groups discussions/justifications to the public. Peterson stated that it is IDFGs responsibility and intention to present both the perspectives of those in favor of the rule change and those with dissenting views to the commission and the broader public. This motion did not receive a second.
- Northen proposed a vote on his split river section proposal of upper and lower sections with 4 fish/day harvest, bait allowed, and year-round fishing in the section below the East Fork; and 2 fish/day harvest with none over 12", no bait, and year-round fishing in the section above the East Fork. East seconded this motion. A vote was held.
    - Yay: Northen
    - Nay: Jost, Cameron, Chorney, Harper, Sanders, East, Santo, McKenna, Zondag Jr.
    - Abstain: Baumann
    - Final vote way 1-9 in favor. The motion did not pass

- Santo stated he would have voted in favor of Northens proposal if the 12" maximum harvest was removed.
- Sanders stated that the proposal added complexity unnecessarily.
- Santo suggested that the current proposal already reduces harvest in over 20 miles of river, while opening harvest in the rest of the river which he viewed as a big compromise already. He stated he would be willing to include a catch and release season as a compromise if it reached consensus.
- Santo proposed the addition of a catch and release season of May 1 – June 15th to the current proposal of 4 fish/day harvest, single barbless hook restriction, and year round season on the upper Big Wood and its tributaries. Chorney seconded. A vote was held.
    - Yay: Santo, Chorney, Jost, Cameron, McKenna, Zondag Jr.
    - Nay: Harper, East, Sanders, Northen
    - Abstain: Baumann
    - Final vote was 6-4 in favor, the motion did not pass.
- Cameron asked the group if they thought a 2 fish limit will make a difference to the population.
- Baumann state that a two fish limit in addition to longer seasons, and allowing bait will result in more fish being killed, and that will likely be enough to move the needle. 4 fish limit is not necessary to see the changes that are sought. She states that she would support reducing the limit to 2 fish/day and keeping the rest of the proposal as-is.
- Chorney proposed reducing the bag limit of the current proposal to 2 fish a day and keeping all other facets in place. McKenna seconded. A vote was held.
    - Yay: Santo, Chorney, Jost, Cameron, McKenna, Harper, Northen
    - Nay: Sanders, East
    - Abstain: Zondag Jr.
    - Final vote was 7-2 (1 abstained) in favor, the motion did not pass
- Mckenna states that asking for 4 fish/day is going to scare a lot of people in the community and is asking for too much. People in the valley are resistant to change, just look at how hard any tax increases are to pass, he believes this will be no different. 2 fish will be palatable. Ultimately this will be a political decision. He states he would be in favor of a 6 fish limit, but realistically he thinks 2 fish is the max that will be supported by residents of the valley.
- Sanders states that the data is more important to him than the social aspect. He believes he is standing up for what is right for the fishery. He stated that hard decisions are hard for a reason, and the group can't yield to political pressure and ignore the data that's been shared. He stands at a 4 fish limit.
- Baumann asked the group why not err on side of caution and propose a lower limit first, then if it has no negative effect, we increase limits in the future instead of proposing high limits initially.
- Cameron stated that the Commission will trust whatever IDFG staff proposes unless there are obvious problems. They will not suggest alternatives like a lower harvest limit our proposal needs to what we want the first time we present it. This won't be a negotiation with the commission as some members have speculated.
- East stated that the group can't shy away from an argument. People will oppose these proposals regardless of what is put forth.

- Chorney brought forth 2 points. 1) our first goal is to simplify regulations and 2) he doesn't believe we are placating anyone by suggesting a lower limit. This is simply trying to strike a compromise within the group because consensus is the most important thing here.
- Northen states that he has compromised a lot by voting for the use of bait system wide which is an idea that he hates and opening harvest opportunity in previously catch and release sections. However, he cannot vote for a 4 fish limit. He states he is in support of 2 fish limit, however.
- Northen asked IDFG their opinions on the debate of 2 vs 4 fish limits. Specifically, if IDFG thought if an extra 2 fish would make a difference.
    - Peterson, Lensing, Brauer, Corsi, and Hebdon all shared their perspectives. In general, IDFG supported all the potential proposed rules as they are biologically defensible and meet the expectation of simplification.
- The group discussed the overall mindset of the BWR valley inhabitants.
- Baumann suggested that the social aspect is much more important than members are letting on. If harvest limits are high, it won't make people harvest more fish.
- Corsi warned the group that the meeting was almost over at 8:48 PM. The group needs to reach consensus in the next ten minutes, move forward with the current proposal and related dissenting views, or schedule a November meeting to continue deliberations.
- Cameron spoke of his experience as a commissioner and stated that the commission will likely not ever change a proposal unless IDFG recommends it.
- Hebdon states that IDFG will present the commission with the chosen proposal whether consensus is reached or not.
- East proposes a compromise between dissenting views in which harvest limits would be 3 fish/day, year-round opportunity, and a single barbless hook restriction that would apply to the entirety of the upper Big Wood River and its tributaries. Harper seconded. A vote was held.
    - Yay: Zondag Jr., Harper, Santo, Sanders, Bauman, Jost, Chorney, Cameron, McKenna, East
    - Nay: Northen
    - Final vote was 10-1 in favor of the proposal. The motion and proposal was passed
- Northen stated he was comfortable with maintaining his dissent.
- Zondag makes motion to move forward with the proposal and present it to the IFG Commission for consideration. Baumann seconded. A vote was held.
    - Yay: Zondag Jr., Harper, Santo, Sanders, Bauman, Jost, Chorney, Cameron, McKenna, East
    - Nay: Northen
    - Final vote was 10-1 in favor. The motion passes. IDFG will present the Commission with the proposal of allowing 3 fish/day harvest, year-round opportunity, and a single barbless hook restriction for the entirety of the upper Big Wood River and its tributaries during the upcoming season setting period.
- Group members requested that IDFG include them in the reporting of this process and allow them the opportunity to provide input into the dissemination of group proceedings and any dissent that may have occurred. IDFG agreed to include group members input in all information sharing with the public. After a short discussion, all parties agreed this input will be most efficiently shared during an in person meeting on a date to be

determined in December which will give IDFG enough time to draft a report of proceeding for the public's use.

- IDFG thanked the group members for their hard work during this process
- The meeting was adjourned at 9:04 PM

Minutes submitted by: Tucker Brauer
Date submitted: 10/15/2026