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Opinion

The Observer

OUR VIEW

Leaving dams the right call

We've said it would be a bad idea to breech the dams on the Lower Snake River. A report commissioned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and Bureau of Reclamation and released last week agrees.

The dams in southeast Washington generate electricity and allow farmers to move grain by barge down the Columbia River's main tributary.

Without the dams, the river would be too shallow to barge wheat and other farm goods the roughly 100 miles between Lewiston, Idaho, and the Tri-Cities. Lake Sacajawea, a reservoir created by Ice Harbor Dam, irrigates 47,000 acres. The loss of electricity generated by the dams would increase the cost of pumping groundwater.

The report confirms all of that, and adds it would increase greenhouse gases and make the region more vulnerable to power blackouts.

Breaching the dams would have the most benefits for endangered salmon, according to the study, and several Indian tribes said it was the best option for offsetting the river system's harm to treaty rights.

But breaching would not allow federal operators to meet the congressional mandate to maintain the dams for navigation, hydropower and irrigation, according to the report. "It also has the highest adverse impacts to other resources, especially social and economic effects," the report states.

Breaching the dams would have major long-term benefits to fish in the Snake River because of improved rearing and migration conditions, according to the report. Estimating the number of fish that would survive and return to spawn is difficult because of the uncertainty of ocean survival, it states.

Drawing down the water behind the dams could expose 14,000 acres that are underwater. The long-term goal would be to return the river to its natural state, benefiting tribal fishing, gathering and occupation, according to the report.

The power could be replaced by more natural gas-generated electricity, but that would increase the emissions of power-related greenhouse gases by 10% in the Northwest and would cost about $1 billion a year, or one-third of BPA's revenues, the report states:

"If Bonneville had to replace the lower Snake River projects' full capability with zero-carbon resources, the rate pressure could be up to 50 percent on wholesale power rates," the report states.

Breaching the dams also would increase transportation-related greenhouse gases, as trucks and trains replace barges, according to the report. Greenhouse gases from transporting wheat would increase by 53%, according to the report.

The report's "preferred alternative" on operating the system includes modifying some fish-passage structures. Also, spilling more water over dams would benefit endangered runs of salmon and steelhead in the Lower Columbia and Snake rivers.

The Center for Biological Diversity issued a statement accusing the report of giving "short shrift to the only viable alternative for saving salmon and ultimately orcas — removing the four lower Snake River dams."

We think supporters of breaching the dams are giving short shrift to the livelihoods of farmers, barge operators, deck hands, dock workers and the vendors who support them.

MY VOICE

Top-down power is on the way out

Others responded to the recent My Voice column by Idaho Power's Mitch Colburn. They pointed out the minor economic benefits of the Board-to-Hemingway power line if it's built, and how those benefits are dwarfed by the cost of the line to utility customers.

I've also written in The Observer about how large power lines increase the likelihood of regional blackouts. There is a real benefit to smaller grids equipped with digital controls. They can sense problems and disconnect from the larger grid when a power failure looms. And no matter how utilities spin it, a 500-kilovolt line increases the likelihood of large fires even as it decreases carbon-capturing forest biomass, paving the way for invasive species. No one disputes that. What I'd like to address now is the real reason the utility wants the line and why it's a big mistake.

Colburn lays it out in his column: Idaho Power wants to move renewable energy across long distances "to customers across the western United States." For customers and for the utility regulators this is a losing proposition. Here's why.

Big utilities now have gotten the memo about the future of power generation. PacifiCorp has announced 7,000 gigawatts of renewable energy and storage capacity to be deployed in its service area including Walla Walla. Meanwhile, Portland General Electric testified at the Oregon Legislature about its turnaround, with storage and renewable energy a big part of PGE's future. They are not alone.

Colorado, California, Nevada, Utah and Arizona have seen enormous growth in locally produced energy and there's more coming. Across the Western United States, utilities are grappling not with a lack of power but with an excess from all the new sources. They need to work with customers who will otherwise start storing power and selling it to each other.

To get ahead of that curve and to maintain cash flow, utilities have decided to compete with that customer base. They have their own plans for renewable energy and storage on their portion of the regional grid. They'd also like to sell the excess — somewhere, anywhere. There's a few problems with that idea, though.

I've asked business journalists and industry executives: Who's going to buy all that power? I've never gotten a straight answer because there isn't one. Everyone will be competing for an ever-shrinking piece of the pie. If more people are producing their own energy, there's less that needs to be transferred from here to there. And if those local grids are producing and storing excess energy, it makes sense to distribute it locally before any gets pushed onto long-distance power lines. So there's less to sell.

There's an even bigger issue. The way the grid has been managed has been top down. That worked when there were a few large dams and coal plants. Even then, getting the right balance across a large region was a tremendous accomplishment. It still is.

But with hundreds, thousands, and eventually tens of thousands of individual sources that makes little sense. The idea that top-down control will reach into every corner of the grid and manage all the residential and commercial sources, and then figure out what's for sale and where it should go, is hard to square with reality.

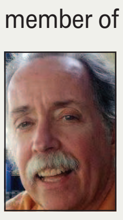
Luckily, there is a model for how to manage such a system: it's the internet, which works in layers. First there's a network connection, then a request for a page, then a page display, and so on — from the bottom-up. There are plans to have the grid work just that way instead of top down.

Energy will be aggregated and stored locally on smart microgrids. If there's excess, a big if, it can be sold off. Utilities will provide transmission services, while working with their customers to manage and moderate the grid. That's where this is going, and very quickly. Fifty-year customer financing for an obsolete power system will only alienate the people the utility should be working with.

That's not much of a business model.

About the author

Norm Cimon of La Grande is a member of the nonprofit Stop B2H Coalition.



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