

Our View

Breaching Snake dams still not a good option

Though hardly the last word on Lower Snake River dams, federal agencies with jurisdiction have affirmed in a final environmental impact statement that breaching four dams in Eastern Washington is a bad idea. We agree. Let the lawsuits continue.

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.

In a ruling in December 2018, U.S. District Judge Michael Simon required the EIS as part of a lawsuit over protected fish species, including an alternative focused on removal of the four Snake River dams and their impacts.

In the final report, agencies rejected pleas from environmental and fishing groups to breach Lower Granite, Little Goose, Lower Monumental and Ice Harbor dams on the Lower Snake River.

The report acknowledged that breaching the dams would do more for fish. But it also would damage the federal system’s other uses, such as flood control, irrigation, navigation, recreation and electricity generation.

The agencies said they couldn’t breach the dams unless Congress changed their mandate.

The report’s “preferred alternative” on operating the system includes modifying some fish-passage structures and spilling more water over dams to benefit endangered runs of salmon and steelhead in the Lower Columbia and Snake rivers. That option for river management complies with President Trump’s order to secure reliable water supplies in the West.

The final report mirrors the conclusions of a draft released in February. Outraged by the draft report, environmental and fishing groups renewed their opposition to the final EIS and urged Congress to intervene.

“The federal plan totally and completely fails Idaho and isn’t good enough for the many guides, outfitters, river businesses and communities in Idaho that depend on healthy runs of fish,” Idaho Conservation League Executive Director Justin Hayes said in a statement.

“The Trump administration’s reckless rush to finalize the Columbia Basin hydropower review process is heartbreaking and immoral,” said Natural Resources Defense Council senior attorney Giulia Good Stefani.

The final environmental impact statement lays the foundation for a decision next month on operating 14 federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

But this is in no way the final word on the subject of dams on the Columbia-Snake system. Environmentalists and fishing groups won’t stop litigating until the courts or Congress order the removal of the dams.

If they win, it will be at the expense of the entire region that depends on low-cost and reliable electricity the dams provide and the livelihoods of farmers, barge operators, deck hands, dock workers in the region and the vendors who support them.



The longer we’re isolated, the less productive we get

COVID-19 is getting old — particularly for employees who’ve been working from home for months.

That’s the finding of a Wall Street Journal article, “Companies Start to Think Remote Work Isn’t So Great After All.”



TOM PURCELL
COLUMNIST

Early on, when millions stopped commuting and started working from home, many companies saw good results. Work was getting done. Most employees enjoyed it. Companies saw an opportunity to reduce future office overhead costs by making remote work part of their long-term strategy.

But that was before cracks began to emerge in the work-from-home model.

According to The Journal, initiatives now take longer. Hiring and integrating new staff is harder. Employees aren’t bonding or growing with each other. Efforts to collaborate online are going flat.

One CEO puts his finger on the problem: It’s “vital to have individuals in a room and see physique language and (other) indicators that don’t come by means of a display screen.”

He’s exactly correct. Humans are

social animals. We’re at our best when we collaborate face to face. Communication theorist Nick Morgan explains why in Forbes: “(W)e share mirror neurons that allow us to match each other’s emotions unconsciously and immediately. We leak emotions to each other. We anticipate and mirror each other’s movements when we’re in sympathy or agreement with one another — when we’re on the same side. And we can mirror each other’s brain activity when we’re engaged in storytelling and listening — both halves of the communication conundrum.”

As a freelance writer, working from home for years, I find myself climbing the walls many days. Too much home-office isolation makes getting things done harder.

Though online meetings are helpful, I long for face-to-face interaction. The best ideas come from in-person brainstorming — as one person jots ideas on a whiteboard and others shout out concepts. You just can’t do that well in online meetings.

Furthermore, I’ve worked for clients I never met in person. Such relationships are never as rich as those in which I’m able to meet and work with clients in their offices over time.

In any event, as companies rediscover human nature’s limitations — that employees isolated at home aren’t as productive or as engaged with colleagues — they shed light

on a growing problem in our society: Increasingly isolated inside our homes, particularly due to the virus, more people are interacting solely through social media and other online platforms.

And these detached means by which we now communicate enable our growing incivility.

This era of smartphones and social media — of nasty tweets and Facebook insults — is making rudeness, reports Psychology Today, “our new normal.”

The magazine cites research, published in the journal Computers in Human Behavior, that finds technology-enabled anonymity and a lack of eye contact are chief contributors.

This prolonged virus is getting old, for sure, and our patience is running thin. But I hope we will learn from the lessons it’s teaching us.

I long for a time when pubs are fully operational and we can discuss politics civilly and with open minds over pints of Guinness, with renewed hope that we’ll figure out how to maintain our humanity and civility in our increasingly nutty world when this virus is finally behind us.

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