

Inslee, Murray lay out game plan for dam-breaching assessment

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Two of Washington state’s top Democrats say they are “fully committed” to a joint federal-state process to consider salmon recovery, including potentially breaching four dams on the lower Snake River. Agricultural stakeholders say they’re concerned about the focus on the dams, and say that their benefits to the region should be considered.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray and Gov. Jay Inslee said in a press release that they will build on “the important data and previously conducted research” to help guide the process. They want to determine “whether there are reasonable means for replacing the benefits” provided by the dams, “sufficient to support breaching” as part of a salmon recovery strategy for the Snake River and the Pacific Northwest.

“We approach this question with open minds and without a predetermined decision,” they said in a joint statement. “Both of us believe that, for the region to move forward, the time has come to identify specific details for how the impacts of breach can, or cannot, be mitigated.”

The recommendations will be completed by July 31.

Murray and Inslee say they will also engage in “robust” outreach to communities across the Pacific Northwest to solicit their views, including “close consultation and advisement by treaty-protected Tribes whose unique perspectives and sovereignty each of us deeply appreciates.”

“We intend to consult with individuals and groups with a wide range of views on the question of dam breaching to ensure the needs of the entire region are addressed,” they said.

Murray will work in Washington, D.C., to ensure salmon recovery is part of any U.S. Army Corps of Engineers strategy in the 2022 fiscal year Water Resources Development Act, including possible expert analysis by federal agencies of breaching as part of a solution, according to the release.

“Without this critical step, options that may be essential to salmon restoration could be excluded from the most timely and viable federal legislative vehicle,” the release states.

The Water Resources Development Act is a biennial bill that serves as the primary authorizing legislation for civil works projects and programs carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Murray will work to secure in the 2022 Water Resources Development Act an authorization of an analysis of the four Lower Snake River dams that will evaluate the costs and impacts of breach alongside other options.

A 2020 federal report by the Corps, Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration concluded dam breaching was not feasible, citing higher energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions, higher transportation costs for farmers and the loss of irrigation water for 48,000 acres of farmland.

Mike Faulk, deputy communications director and press secretary for Inslee’s office, noted that following the report, Inslee sent a letter with “strenuous objections” for “the Trump-era Army Corps EIS process.”

“We have communicated with the agricultural community,” Faulk told the Capital Press. “We will continue to do so throughout this process, as we will with other regional stakeholders.”

“We appreciate Senator Murray’s and Governor Inslee’s continued commitment to seek out fact-based



The Ice Harbor Dam near Burbank, Wash., is one of four dams on the lower Snake River. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray will assess breaching the dams.



Courtesy U.S. Senate
Sen. Patty Murray

information and solutions related to the future of the Columbia River System,” said Matt Rabe, regional director of public affairs for the Northwest division of the Corps. “We stand ready to support their efforts with our available data and technical experience.”

Kurt Miller, executive director of Northwest RiverPartners, which serves not-for-profit electric utilities, welcomed Inslee and Murray’s dedication to salmon recovery, but expressed concern for their apparent focus on the dams.

“With massive declines in chinook salmon survival up and down in the Pacific Coast over the past 50 years tied to climate change and a warming ocean, the idea of breaching major carbon-free generation infrastructure just doesn’t make sense,” Miller said. “It is important to note that our region and the nation are falling behind when it comes to decarbonization, according to the recent Code Red for Humanity issued by the United Nations earlier this year. We don’t want to dig a deeper hole in our efforts to reduce our region’s carbon footprint.”



Washington Gov. Jay Inslee.

The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, which supports navigation, energy, trade and economic development, echoed Miller’s concerns.

“PNWA completely agrees with the Governor’s and Senator’s statement that salmon are essential to Washington state’s economy and cultural heritage,” according to an association statement. “However, we are concerned that their narrow focus on four federal dams with outstanding fish passage and benefits to the entire region and nation fails to place the salmon recovery discussion into proper context.”

The association pointed out that the lower Snake River is part of a larger hydropower, irrigation and transportation system that provides direct benefits to Montana, Idaho, Oregon and beyond; direct and indirect benefits across the Midwest, Pacific Coast and Southwest regions; and worldwide benefits to the U.S. and its trading partners in Asia and elsewhere.

“Removing the lower Snake River dams would be a significant setback to our region’s aggressive and

laudable decarbonization and electrification goals,” the association stated.

The focus on the four dams ignores the broader salmon crisis, the association stated, saying that salmon populations are “plummeting” throughout the region, including on undammed rivers with “pristine” habitat.

“Meanwhile the lower Snake River dams are ‘run of river,’ do not block fish, and in fact have outstanding fish passage rates,” the association stated. “Multiple groups and studies convened by federal and state elected officials and agencies — including several led by the Washington State governor’s office itself — have all concluded that the certain costs of breaching the lower Snake River dams significantly outweigh the highly speculative benefits to salmon and orca.”

Inslee and Murray’s announcement seems to reframe the issue of whether the lower Snake dams’ services can be replaced instead of whether they should be replaced, Miller said.

“The calls to breach the dams for salmon recovery

lack the scientific rigor necessary for such a drastic decision,” he said. “There is still so much we don’t know about salmon and we risk doing more long-term harm than good by breaching the dams, given the context of climate change. It doesn’t sound like Senator Murray and Governor Inslee intend to address that issue.”

“PNWA encourages Gov. Inslee, Sen. Murray and other parties in the Northwest to reject extreme and narrow approaches like Snake River dam breaching, and collaborate to help our region’s salmon in every part of their life cycle,” the waterways association stated.

“Every community in the Pacific Northwest knows the value and importance of our iconic salmon runs — the time is now to take decisive action,” according to the Inslee-Murray statement. “We look forward to working with every community from every part of the Pacific Northwest and those on both sides of the aisle to finally establish a regional path forward to save the salmon.”

This story will be updated.



Glen Squires

Dams: ‘Salmon recovery needs to avoid a single approach focused on destroying necessary infrastructure’

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all stakeholders, particularly on wheat growers dependent on the lower Snake River dams. Dam breaching is not a viable path forward.”

“Salmon recovery needs to avoid a single approach focused on destroying necessary infrastructure and instead look at the full picture of the issues impacting these populations,” said Clint Carlson of the Oregon Wheat Growers League.

Hennings and Carlson pointed to a 2020 environmental impact statement conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration. It concluded dam breaching was not feasible. The report cited higher energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions, higher transportation costs for farmers and the loss of irrigation water for 48,000 acres of farmland.

“We are confident that the environmental impact statement released in 2020 provides definitive evidence that dam breaching is not the solution, and we will strongly oppose any efforts to undermine the countless time and resources that were put into the development of those findings,” Hennings said.

“That process had robust public participation, rigorous scientific analysis and resulted in a conclusion that does not include breaching the four lower Snake River dams,” Carlson said. “We are concerned that an individual state would propose to develop a separate process in which the outcomes would have a widespread impact throughout the Pacific Northwest.”

The National Association of Wheat Growers will work to educate stakeholders about grower concerns with removing the dams, which would make the river system “unnavigable and jeopardize wheat farmers and the rural economy,” CEO Chandler Goule said.





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