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Opinion

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Our View

Snake River dam report leaves many costly questions

In political parlance, it's called kicking the can down the road.

And it's an expensive can at that.

That's when a politician looks for a way to put off an issue, at least temporarily.

That's what Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray have done with their report on breaching the four dams on the lower Snake River.

The issue has been a goal of some tribes and environmental groups as a way to help the salmon runs. They have opposed the dams since they were built nearly 60 years ago.

Unfortunately for them, if the dams were taken down the direct costs and the costs to the region's economy would dramatically outweigh any benefits to fish, according to the Inslee-Murray report.

"Replacing the services provided by the dams could range in cost from $10.3 billion to $31.3 billion, and anticipated costs are still not available for several necessary actions," according to the report.

Associated Press File

The Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River near Pomeroy, Wash. It is one of four dams under consideration for breaching.

In other words, they really don't know the total cost, which should make any taxpayer shudder.

Imagine, for a moment, that you were building a really nice house. The estimate from the contractor came in at $10 billion to $30 billion — and a lot more that can't be determined.

No responsible person — or irresponsible person, for that matter — would commit to that, not even a politician. Open-ended estimates can be translated into two phrases: "We don't know the cost," and "Watch out."

Farther down in the report, the estimated cost of building either a 3-gigawatt — the current peak generation load of the dams — or a 14.9-gigawatt power plant to replace the electricity the dams generate came in at $9.3 billion to $56.9 billion. That range is so large it is meaningless.

Keeping the dams would cost $150 million to $278 million a year — a bargain compared to the other numbers in the report.

Some expenses the report writers were able to figure out were disturbing.

That includes the cost of transporting wheat to export terminals downstream on the Columbia River.

Barge rates average 30 to 45 cents a bushel, while railroads charge 50 to 75 cents a bushel, the report found.

What the report didn't say is how unreliable most railroad service already is. It doesn't matter how much the railroad charges if the train never shows up, or shows up weeks late.

Another cost the report didn't include involved trucking the wheat downriver. The region's roads and highways would have to be rebuilt — so would the railroads — along with the added cost of trucking.

Replacing irrigation water from the Snake River would be done with deeper wells and reconfiguring irrigation systems at a cost of about $1 billion, according to the report. The report didn't say why Snake River water wouldn't be used.

Missing from the report is a guarantee that environmental groups would stop suing over the Columbia and Snake River dams. It was included in the initial proposal from U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, but has now disappeared.

So there you have it. Breaching the Snake River dams is too expensive for taxpayers, would cost farmers more in higher transportation and irrigation expenses, would cost electricity consumers in higher rates to build new generators, destroy a significant portion of the region's economy and possibly help fish runs.

And the total cost? Who knows?

Our View

An all-electric Tesla Model 3. California will ban the sale of new gasoline-powered cars and trucks in 2035, and Washington and Oregon are following suit.

California jumps off a cliff, and her neighbors follow

If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you jump too? Readers of a certain age probably recall hearing that parental retort after trying to justify some youthful indiscretion by explaining that all your friends did it too.

That rhetorical question came to mind last week when officials in Washington and Oregon said that they would follow California's lead and ban the sale of new gas and diesel cars and trucks in 2035 to fight global climate change.

Off the cliff we go.

On Aug. 25 the California Air Resources Board — an unelected regulatory agency — announced new rules that will phase out the sale of new gas- and diesel-powered vehicles by 2035. Cars and trucks already registered and on the road can continue to be used, but new cars, trucks and SUVs after that date must be powered by something other than fossil fuels — electricity or, perhaps, pixie dust.

"California now has a groundbreaking, world-leading plan to achieve 100% zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035," Gov. Gavin Newsom said. "It's ambitious, it's innovative, it's the action we must take if we're serious about leaving the planet better off for future generations."

Keep in mind, not one Californian cast a vote for this, and neither did any of their elected legislators. But, it's California, and to quote Forrest Gump, "stupid is as stupid does."

But it doesn't end there.

In 2020, the Democrat-controlled Washington Legislature passed a measure that put California in the driver's seat. Senate Bill 5811, passed by the Washington Legislature in 2020 on mostly party-line votes in the House and Senate, committed the state to mirroring California's vehicle-emission laws.

So, now, Washington by default is set to ban new fossil fuel-powered vehicles by 2035.

Democrats said the bill was necessary because climate change is a crisis. Republicans complained that letting California dictate changes in Washington law was fundamentally wrong.

"We've basically given up our sovereignty," said Washington state Rep. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake. "It's absolutely wrong what's happening here."

Yes, but it doesn't end there.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's office last week announced that regulators in Oregon are already developing similar rules.

None of this has been approved by voters, or passed by the legislature. But, if it's good enough for unelected political appointees on the California Air Resources Board, it must be good enough for Californians and their neighbors in Washington and Oregon.

How much will all this cost? Where will the infrastructure to support this come from? How will this impact working families, farmers and tradesmen? No one seems to know, and the regulators don't seem to care.

Where's Mom when you really need her?

Federal lands grazing challenged

Grazing is the foundation of the U.S. beef industry. And, regardless of the source, whether private or federal lands, the total forage base of this country is the single factor making the greatest contribution to the success of the industry.

There are 770 million acres of rangeland in the U.S. One-half of those acres are privately owned while 43% are managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service. Grazing is permitted on about 50% of those federal lands.

GUEST VIEW

John Nalivka

Given that all grazing acres are critical to the U.S. beef industry, I have always firmly believed it is important to pay close attention to any appeal by the various environmental groups to limit grazing on any of these acres, regardless of whether they are federal or private.

While climate change may be the lead headline to "justify" the elimination of cattle grazing in the U.S., I recently read an article that brought into focus another hot-topic discussion — wolves — and tied it to grazing. The article presented management changes proposed by Oregon State University to increase the number of wolves and beavers — I repeat, beavers. They have added a new dimension to the discussion!

Remember that gray wolves were put back on the endangered species list in January 2021 after being delisted in October 2020. OSU's research paper was entitled, "Rewilding the American West."

Without going into the weeds of this article concerning "rewilding" the habitat, there were a couple of statements that I thought truly stood out.

First, "the authors determined the most common threat was livestock grazing, which they say can cause stream and wetland degradation."

A second statement was "we suggest the removal of grazing on federal allotments from approximately 285,000 square kilometers within the "rewilding" (my quotes) network, representing 29% of total 985,000 square kilometers of federal lands in the 11 western states that are annually grazed."

I would submit that whether it be wolves, riparian areas, wild horses, climate change OR beavers, just to name a few, this is a serious continuation of the challenges faced by cattlemen in the race to eliminate cattle grazing.

The challenge to federal lands grazing has been in the courts for decades and it is far from ending. Cattlemen, whether grazing federal or private land, must remain vigilant to the challenge if the beef industry is to remain a solid contributor to U.S. agriculture, the food industry, and the U.S. economy.

John Nalivka is president and owner of Sterling Marketing Inc., an agricultural economic research and advisory firm in Vale, Ore. He has provided market research and advisory services for the livestock and meat industries since 1991.