

'HEAL OUR ECOSYSTEM'

Protesters demand that the Army Corps of Engineers breach Snake River dams to save salmon and orcas

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Braving the rain and cold, 80 people marched with 20-foot banners to lay flowers, cedar and ferns in honor of recently deceased orcas. They had a 10-foot salmon and a giant inflatable orca in tow.

The crowd was gathered Oct. 5 at Holladay Park in Northeast Portland to demonstrate against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bonneville Power Administration.

Facing the Northwest District Headquarters of the Army Corps on Northeast Holladay, participants gave speeches through megaphones between shouts of "Breach the dams! Free the Snake!" and "Save the Salmon - Save the Orcas!"

The crowd then marched around the corner to the Bonneville Power Administration on Northeast 11th Avenue, led by Palouse Chief Jesse Nightwalker, and listened to Native drummers and singers while laying down flowers for the baby of the orca mother Tahlequah, who lost a newborn calf in July. Tahlequah spent an agonizing 17 days swimming through Puget Sound on what whale experts called a "tour of grief," carrying her calf's body for over 1,000 miles even after it began to decompose. Flowers were left in a memorial in the courtyard.

For the past three years, no newborn member of the southern resident killer whale population has survived past birth, producing widespread fear that this critically endangered species is sliding into extinction. Their primary food source, Chinook salmon, has had its spring run

threatened in the Lower Columbia River since 1999, and last month, state fish managers closed all fall Chinook fishing up to Pasco due to their disastrously low rates of survival. Another resident orca, Scarlet, was declared dead Sept. 13.

Rally organizer Michele Seidelman has been organizing weekly overpass actions to build momentum for the rally and plans to return to the Army Corps building every week until the dams are breached. Seidelman said she is driven by a personal bond with the orcas and her certainty that they cannot survive unless the lower Snake dams are removed.

"There's no chance of their survival if we don't do it. Zero," she said.

"There's a 2002 environmental impact study that taxpayers spent millions on, and it's just sitting there gathering dust. They've used all the options except option No. 4, which is to breach. And they need to breach this year. The people who can make this decision are working in this office," Seidelman said.

"We come today to the rally to push the Corps of Engineers to breach the dams, the four Snake River dams in Washington, because our orcas are starving to death," co-organizer Miguel Ramirez said. "If we breach the dams, we allow the salmon back in the waters and heal our ecosystem in the Columbia River and Pacific Ocean."

Demonstrators carried signs with the names of Army Corps officials they said can save these orcas by restoring the salmon in the Snake River. As the largest tributary to the Columbia, the Snake historically provided as much as 50 percent of the salmon eaten by the resident orcas. One

sign read, "Ponganis - Do The Right Thing - Breach The Dams." David J. Ponganis is the director of programs for the Army Corps' Northwestern Division.

A day earlier, the Army Corps and Bonneville scheduled a media conference call to "set (the) record straight" on orcas. On that call, federal officials with both agencies disputed the connection between Snake River dams and the death of salmon and orcas. Corps officials further insisted they did not have the authority to breach the dams without special approval from Congress.

Each of these claims is disputed by Jim Waddell, a retired Army Corps engineer who worked on the Army Corps' breaching study in 2002 and now runs the website DamSense.org. Waddell said he has documented communications with then-Assistant Secretary of the Army Jo-Ellen Darcy, confirming that the \$33 million study he worked on is still the framework for ongoing decisions at the Army Corps - meaning the agency can use its breaching option without delay.

"I'm reading what the reports are saying, the empirical data, and I'm saying if we don't breach two dams, starting in December this year, the empirical evidence says you're likely to lose Chinook and

orcas," he said. "Certainly orcas in the sense that they will lose their breeding population. There's 73 orcas left, but there's only one male and five females that are actively breeding. If you lose those, you've made a huge hit in your genetic pool."

An online petition started by Waddell asks the Army Corps to use its authority to begin breaching the dams this year. In September, the petition had 335,000 signatures; it now has more than 600,000.

The day after the

agencies' conference call, a rally was opened with speeches from the Lower Snake River Palouse matriarch Carrie Schuster and her son, Chief Nightwalker. They were joined by the Umatilla elder Art McConville and Native drummers from across the region.

Schuster spoke to the crowd about how the lower Snake River dams came to be built and what they cost her family. Widely opposed initially for their threats to fish and wildlife, construction began on Ice Harbor dam in 1955, Lower Monumental dam in 1961, Little Goose dam in 1963 and Lower Granite dam in 1965. A fifth dam was proposed but was ultimately

defeated.

"We were the last opposing village in existence on the river," Schuster said. "They kicked us out of there in 1959 'cause that's when the water started coming up, and they had the county sheriffs there. They asked the state patrol 'cause they knew they were gonna have problems with my mother."

Schuster said her mother made a handshake agreement with U.S. Sens. Warren Magnuson and Henry Jackson, who promised that after 50 years, her land would be returned and the dams would come down.

"That's the reason that we're trying to get them to honor the agreement," Schuster said. "Bringing the dams down - that's the only thing that's really going to help, not only the salmon but also all the pods of orcas that are now threatened."

Like the orcas, Schuster and other local people had much of their food on the Snake River obliterated by the dams - as well as homes and villages buried beneath reservoirs. One 1999 report produced for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission showed that 90 percent of the salmon originally harvested by the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho had been lost since European contact. The same study referenced an interagency scientific study called PATH, originally funded by Bonneville Power Administration, that found

breaching the lower Snake River dams created the best chance of recovering endangered salmon in the Snake River - with an 80 percent likelihood of success.

It concluded that "Lower Snake River dams, together with dams on the mainstem Columbia, contributed significantly to the destruction of Nez Perce Treaty-reserved salmon, steelhead, sturgeon, eulachon" and that failure to take strong actions "commits to continued suffering, ill health and premature death for the peoples of the study tribes - all at unconscionable levels."

On Oct. 5, Nightwalker led the crowd on its march route for three hours, singing several songs with other Native performers before the crowd circled back in to the park's center, where dozens gathered under canopies to dry their hands and write letters to Army Corps officials.

"I've been following the story ever since I heard of Tahlequah carrying her baby, and that really broke my heart," Marley Delgado said. "I'm writing to the Army Corps of Engineers, asking them to please breach the lower four dams on the Snake River, because they and I both know that's their only chance at survival at this point. Extinction is forever, and I want to know if that's the legacy that they want to leave behind."

"It's time to breach those useless dams," Holly Cooper said. "We're not the only ones that live on this earth. Take responsibility. Time is of the essence. These animals are starving to death."

Other protesters had personalized the suffering of the orcas, carrying their stories as they trudged through the rain in orca costumes.

"Each one of us represents an individual orca. Everybody's got their own identity," said Debra Eilers, a traveler from Port Townsend who played the role of matriarch orca Ocean Sun.

"These dams were really built without any meaningful tribal consultation. In my prior life, before I became an orca, I was actually an attorney. And I do believe the dams violated the terms of the treaty because it's affecting their usual and accustomed places to fish. And many cultural sites are also literally under water," Eilers said.

"I grew up on a farm, and so did Oreo (another orca) here, so I'm very sympathetic to farmers. But the thing is these dams were just built in the '60s and '70s. They're not like the great pyramids of Egypt that have always been there for thousands of years. So the farmers on the Palouse got their wheat to the market long before, for a hundred years before those dams went in. I do think that when the dams are breached, there should be mitigation packages. I'm totally sympathetic. It would actually be a lot cheaper for taxpayers to pay the farmers to ship alternative ways than to keep doing these crazy salmon engineering fixes."

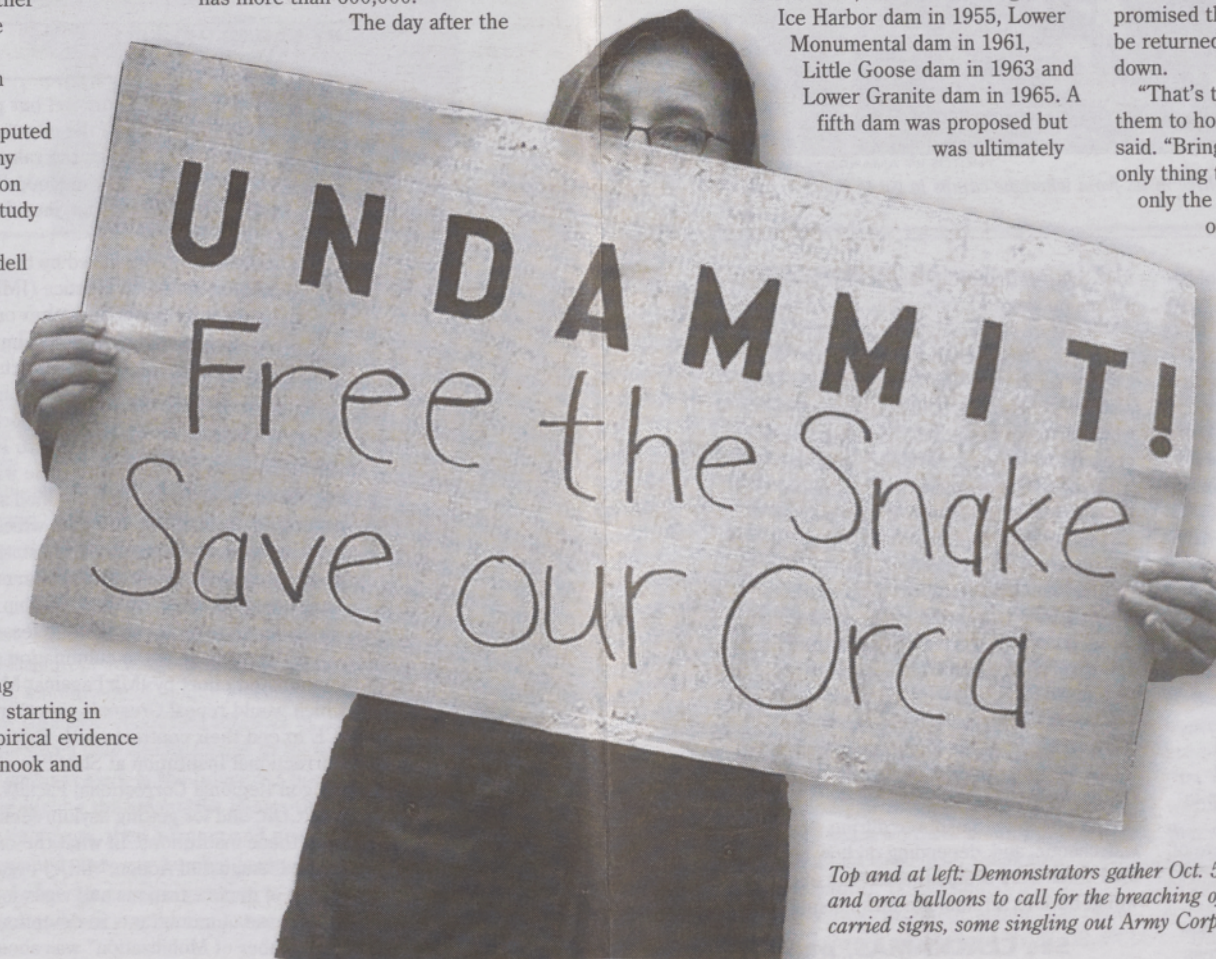
At 70 years old, Shuster still believes she will see the dams come down, restoring the home she was forced to leave when she was 9.

Seidelman, the rally organizer, also has hope.

"Since Tahlequah calf's death, there's been a new spotlight," Seidelman said. "We've got people doing actions in Chicago, New York, Las Vegas, Florida, Tacoma and Seattle. We're just getting started."



PHOTOS BY COLIN DURFEE



Top and at left: Demonstrators gather Oct. 5 at Holladay Park in Northeast Portland with giant salmon and orca balloons to call for the breaching of lower Snake River dams. Many of the demonstrators carried signs, some singling out Army Corps of Engineer officials.