

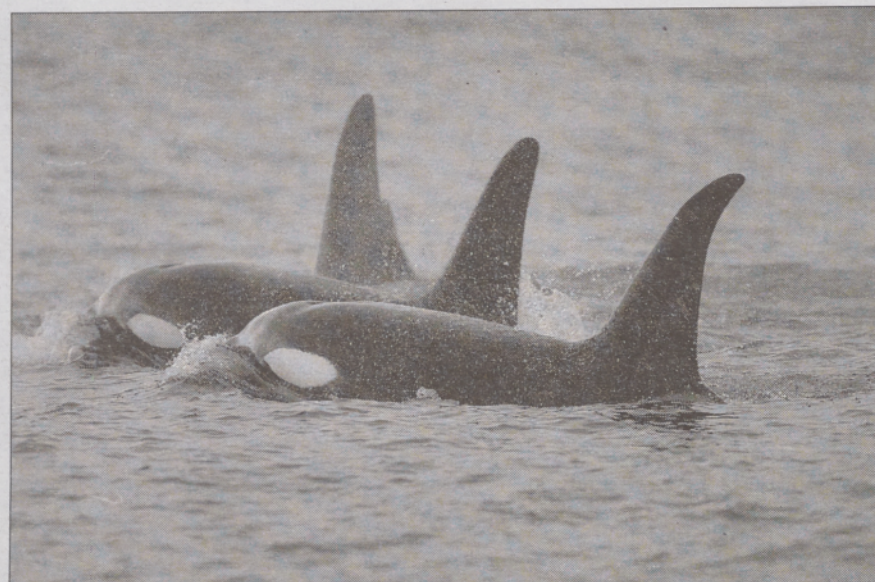


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DAMMED TO DEATH?

As a Washington state panel calls for studying the breaching of Snake River dams to protect orcas, pressure builds for swift action

BY STEPHEN QUIRKE
STAFF WRITER

As the loss of the Puget Sound orca pod known as the Southern Residents continues to make headlines around the country, public pressure has also grown to protect this critically endangered species by restoring its food source in the Columbia – starting by breaching four low-performance dams on Washington's Snake River.

This goal was included in the Southern Resident Killer Whale Recovery Task Force's final recommendations to Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. The recommendations, delivered Nov. 16, included 36 actions covering everything from water pollution to underwater noise, alongside a stakeholder process to study the breaching of Snake River dams.

The report was a disappointment for many orca advocates who had sought immediate dam breaching, including Ken Balcomb, a task force member and principal researcher at the Whale Research Center. But the addition of orca advocates to this long-standing campaign has also infused it with new energy.

"As someone who's worked on this for 20 years, I feel more confident that we can get those dams out and restore that river than

in 20 years," said Sam Mace, program director of the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition. "I just hope it's in time for the orcas, and I hope it's in time for the runs."

The task force's delayed report followed an Oct. 15 letter from six scientists with decades of orca experience, who cautioned that Southern Resident orca survival "may be impossible" without restoration of Chinook salmon in the Columbia Basin. The scientists urged Inslee and the task force "to recommend steps for lower Snake River dam removal as soon as possible."

Three days later, activists in orca costumes laid themselves on the floor and staged a "die-in" at an Orca Task Force meeting in Tacoma, protesting the task force's decision just to study dam removal.

The same day its final recommendations were released, roughly 100 people rallied at the Washington State Capitol to demand the immediate breaching of Snake River dams. They later marched to the steps outside the Washington Supreme Court building, where 11-year-old London Fletcher delivered a fiery speech directed at Inslee.

"What legacy will you leave behind for my generation?" Fletcher asked. "Will it be a legacy of mass extinction and barren waters, or will it be a legacy of hope and prosperity? Will you be the one who breaks the cycle and be the one who stood for what is right,

or will you be remembered as orca killer Inslee?"

Kelly Iriye, project coordinator with the advocacy organization Dam Sense, explained why immediate removal has become such a priority for orca advocates.

"Each of the lower Snake River dams and their connected reservoirs kill 2 million smolts. ... Removing just one of these overpowered obstacles will allow 2 million young fish to make it that much farther down the stream."

"Once they get to the ocean, give them 14 to 18 months, and we get roughly 500,000 adults – 500,000 adults for our orcas, for our fishermen, for the people who want to go out and have recreational fishing. That's what we can get in 14 to 18 months for breaching one dam. No other action on Earth will produce this result this quickly."

Demonstrators later marched across the street to the state legislative building led by Palouse Chief Jesse Nightwalker, where they occupied the lobby and shouted chants like "Breach The Dams – Free the Snake (Now)" and "Call the Corps – Demand All Four." They also delivered a letter to Inslee's office, which they called "Recommendation 74 - The People's Recommendation." This document insisted "that Governor Inslee call Lt. Gen. Semonite of the U.S. Army Corps of

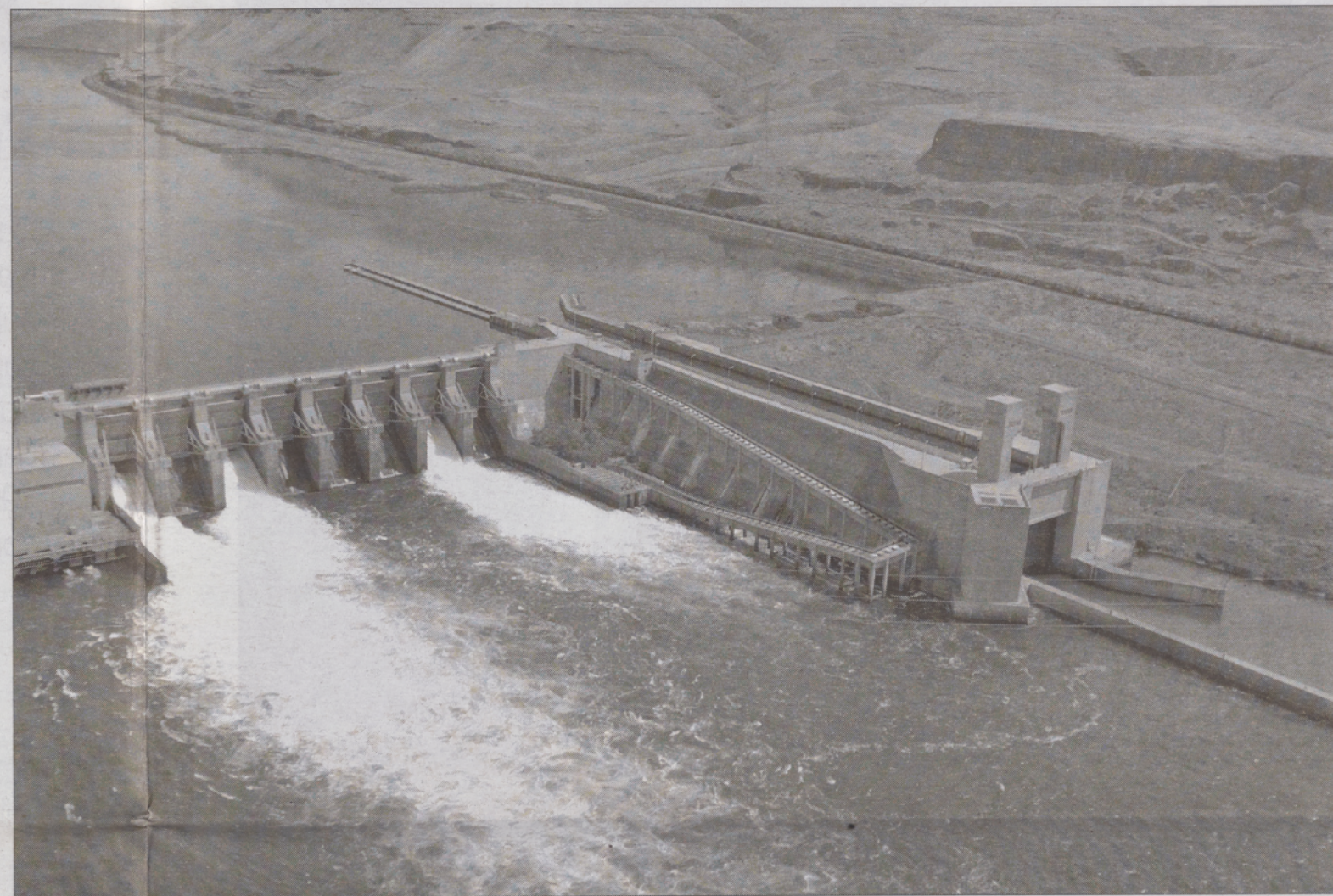


PHOTO BY BONNEVILLE POWER/FICKR

The Lower Monumental Dam is among four Lower Snake River dams environmental advocates are calling for officials to remove to save populations of Southern Resident killer whales (far left).

Engineers and demand that he order the immediate breach of the Lower Snake River dams."

This call for immediate breaching has grown louder in recent weeks. Activists say they have visited the Army Corps' NW Division Headquarters in Portland every week since Oct. 5, and one petition directed at Inslee has gathered over 680,000 signatures. After the Governor's Orca Task Force announced its draft recommendations on Sept. 24, the breaching of Snake River dams became the No. 1 focus of public comments.

"The Army Corps does have the power to breach the Snake River dams, starting with Lower Granite and Little Goose, this winter," said Iriye, of Dam Sense. "Breaching the Snake River dams is not a silver bullet, but it is the largest bullet that we have."

Such an immediate demand runs parallels to litigation efforts that have pursued salmon restoration on the Columbia and Snake rivers since 1991. The latest effort arrived in February last year, when Columbia Riverkeeper and other conservation groups sued the Environmental Protection Agency for failing to enact temperature regulations required under the Clean Water Act, called the Total Maximum Daily Load.

In 2015, an estimated 250,000 sockeye salmon died in the Columbia and Snake Rivers due to warm waters exceeding 68 degrees, and according to the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition, temperatures rose above the lethal 68 degrees for roughly two weeks in July at Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental and Little Goose dams.

The EPA began drafting this temperature regulation in 2001 for the Columbia and lower Snake Rivers under agreements with Oregon and Washington, issuing a draft regulation in 2003.

But the agency abandoned the process under pressure from the Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the four lower Snake dams through its Walla Walla District office. Such pressure apparently stemmed from concerns the efforts would disrupt dam operations.

One internal EPA letter from 2007 warned that when the agency restarts this process, "it is possible that strident opposition from the Corps and/or the Bureau (of Reclamation) will continue in spite of our best efforts to reach agreement on the policy and technical concerns."

On Nov. 16 regional EPA Director Daniel Opalski began to meet that order, sending letters to Oregon and Washington announcing that this lack of temperature regulations violated the Clean Water Act,

adding that "EPA would not have taken this action if it had not been ordered to do so by the district court."

Under the court order, the EPA will now have until Dec. 17 to announce new temperature regulations that protect endangered fish in the Columbia and lower Snake Rivers. EPA lawyers, however, are now appealing the ruling and asking for court permission to move off the expedited timeline. A decision is expected by Dec. 17. Such temperature regulations could affect dam operations ahead of the Army Corps' court-ordered environmental impact statement, due by 2021.

The Nez Perce Tribe, as well as the states of Oregon and Washington, have insisted that this study include the breaching of the four lower Snake River dams.

This court-ordered environmental impact statement will not be the first to study dam removal on the Snake River. In 2002, the Corps produced an environmental impact statement that studied dam breaching in Option 4 – an option it did not select. Earlier in 1999, a spokesperson for its Walla Walla District, Nola Conway, said, "It's not a matter of if we breach, but when we breach."

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Kelly Iriye,
project coordinator
with Dam Sense