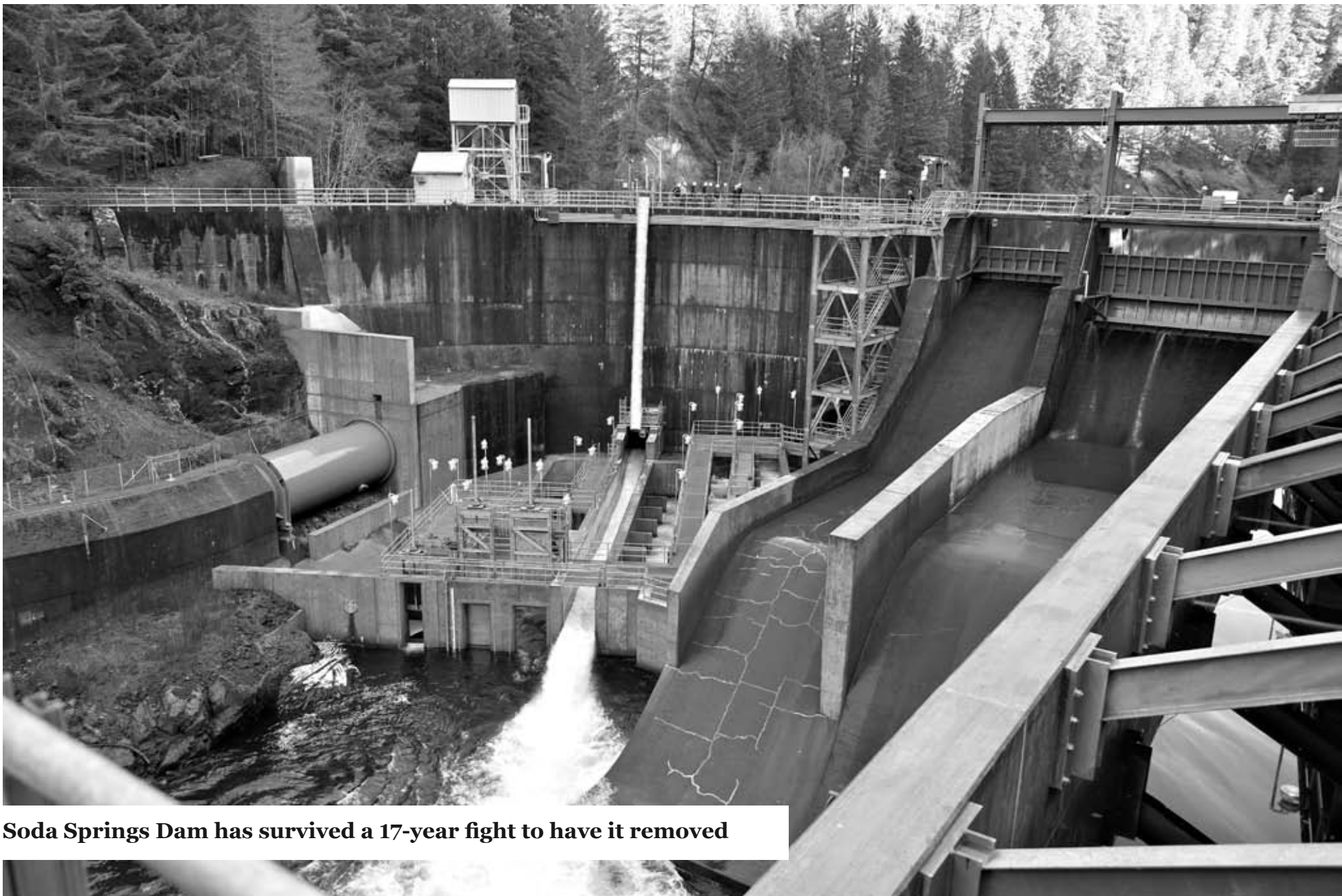




Soda Springs Dam has survived a 17-year fight to have it removed

River Be Dammed

Profits vs. fish on the North Umpqua • Story and photos by Ted Taylor

Some 65 dams came down for various reasons in the U.S. in 2012, according to *National Geographic*, and Oregon rivers are averaging three or four intentional dam breaches a year. But one troublesome dam, Soda Springs, still remains on the North Umpqua River, despite recommendations for its removal by a federal agency, numerous environmental organizations and even a study funded by the project's owner, PacifiCorp. The story of why this remote dam remains standing is not widely known, and it boils down to corporate profits versus the environment, with bad timing thrown in.

Soda Springs is operated by PacifiCorp on Forest Service land in cooperation with multiple government agencies. It stands in a deep, shaded canyon of columnar basalt cliffs, high in the Cascades 60 miles east of Roseburg, an area made famous by Zane Gray and generations of steelhead fishers. Its gray concave face shows 60 years of stains, cracks and patches, but it's both old and new. The dam now has a large square hole cut through it at the reservoir waterline and an elaborate 600-foot fish ladder system that is considered a marvel of engineering. The \$60 million ladder took four years to design, three years to build and was completed in November 2012. Flood debris last year did major damage to part of the new fish screening system, but some salmon, trout and perhaps lamprey are finding their way up the ladders and pools, rising 60 feet to the reservoir to continue their migration upstream to spawn.

Soda Springs is important because, even though it is small, it is the first obstruction in the North Umpqua Hydroelectric Project, a 194-megawatt system of eight dams, canals, penstocks and generators. Salmon and steelhead run smack into the dam after swimming 160 miles from the ocean. And the dam has a big impact on the 6-plus miles of river above it to Toketee Falls, a natural obstruction as the river flows from its headwaters at Lemolo Lake.

Why it remains standing

The dam was relicensed for 35 years in 2001 under the more environmentally stringent rules of the Electric Consumer Protection Act of 1986 and other legislation.

Relicensing followed a 17-year debate. The dam had been recommended for removal by the U.S. Forest Service, a multi-party "Cooperative Watershed Analysis" (contracted and paid for by PacifiCorp), the North Umpqua Foundation, Umpqua Watersheds, Steamboaters, Umpqua Valley Audubon, Native Fish Society, Trout Unlimited, WaterWatch, Pacific Rivers Council, Oregon Natural Resources Council, Sierra Club, Earthjustice and others. Nobody wanted to keep the highly profitable dam — except PacifiCorp, which was under pressure at the time to turn more profits under the new ownership of Scottish Power. PacifiCorp was supposed to be a highly profitable \$10 billion investment in the growing energy field, but "PacifiCorp has been a disappointment to Scottish Power investors," wrote reporters Heather Simmons and Jad Mouawad in *The New York Times* in May 2005.

A "settlement committee" involving PacifiCorp, various government agencies and non-governmental groups formed to study options for the dam in the 1990s, but Scottish Power bought PacifiCorp in 1999 and "they refused to go along with dam removal and PacifiCorp walked out of the settlement process," says Stan Vejtasa of Umpqua Valley Audubon. "PacifiCorp then claimed the hydro plant was only marginally economic (a huge lie!) and they could only afford to spend \$25 million on environmental mitigation efforts." Vejtasa says PacifiCorp wanted to spend that money not on fixing the dam but on projects "that had nothing to do with hydro."

Vejtasa has expertise in such issues. He's now retired and volunteering with Audubon, but he worked 12 years as an engineer in the utility industry, evaluating the economics and technologies of power generation, including hydro. He challenged PacifiCorp's numbers during relicensing. "I showed the project was a real money maker, producing power for less than one-third of the current wholesale price of power," he says. "I also showed PacifiCorp could afford to spend as much as \$200 million on mitigation and the project would still be economic." He says he also demonstrated that Soda Springs Dam could be removed and the system would "still have significant peaking capacity" for power production by better using Toketee Lake for water storage.

PacifiCorp, he says, did not challenge his analysis, so it then abandoned its economic "propaganda" and turned to science. "Of course, their science said they could merely install fish passage and the aquatic functions of the river would be restored."