

# Washington state funds Snake River dam removal study

Money part of state budget

By COURTNEY FLATT  
Northwest Public Broadcasting

Tucked into Washington's \$52.4 billion operating budget passed Sunday night by the Legislature is controversial funding for a stakeholder group tasked with looking into what would happen should the four lower Snake River dams be removed or altered.

Supporters say the group will make sure Washingtonian's voices are heard in the often contentious conversation around dam removal. Critics say the effort is a waste of time and money — too similar to a discussion already happening at the federal level.

Gov. Jay Inslee had asked for \$750,000, following the recommendations of the state's Southern Resident Orca Task Force, a group created by the governor to find ways to save the orcas.

"Funding the Snake River stakeholder discussions is critical for Washington com-

munities and stakeholders to assure their voice is heard and interests addressed if the four lower Snake River dams are removed — which the science shows is essential for the salmon and orca," Bill Arthur, the Sierra Club's salmon campaign coordinator, said in a statement.

Critics of Washington's dam removal study have said the federal process is enough and what the governor asked to spend money on essentially duplicates the federal government's assessment.

"Calls for additional processes and forums that undermine the existing study are counterproductive, not based in science, and divert resources from the creation of a credible plan that is best for salmon and the Northwest," Kristin Meira, executive director of Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, said in a statement.

U.S. District Court Judge Michael Simon ordered federal regulators to take a hard look at all options to protect salmon, including the potential removal of the four dams on the lower Snake River.



Ken Balcomb/Center for Whale Research

Chinook salmon are an important source of food for whales.

"Despite billions of dollars spent on these efforts, the listed species continue to be in a perilous state," Simon wrote. "The (Federal Columbia River Power System) remains a system that 'cries out' for a new approach."

That kicked off a yearslong process, where federal agencies began studying ways to protect imperiled salmon on the Columbia and Snake rivers. A final decision on that study is expected in September 2020.

In an earlier statement, Washington Republican U.S. Reps. Dan Newhouse and Cathy McMorris Rodgers said spending taxpayer money

to look at removing or altering the dams would be a waste.

"Congress has the sole authority to authorize breaching our federal dams, and as representatives of eastern Washington communities that depend on the many benefits they provide, breaching them is out of the question. We commit to do everything in our power to save our dams," the representatives said in the joint statement.

At a salmon conference in Boise in April, Michael Garrity said there's "new urgency" around these issues in the state because of the connection between salmon and orca health. Garrity is the Colum-

bia River and water policy manager for the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife.

"There's a call for exploring the social and economic benefits of breaching the lower Snake River dams," Garrity said during a panel.

At the same conference, U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, said he has started to ask "what if" questions, looking more deeply at what should happen if the dams are removed or altered. What happens to Lewiston, the most inland port in the West? What happens to farmers? How do growers transport their grains?

"There are an awful lot of questions that have to be asked, because you need to address these if you are going to solve this problem," Simpson said.

Simpson challenged the group to come together to save salmon. Conservation groups are now drawing comparisons to that challenge, with the funding of Washington's stakeholder task force.

"We are encouraged to see leadership emerging in both states. The problems fac-

ing salmon, orca and energy in the Northwest can't wait," said Sam Mace, inland Northwest program director for the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition, in a statement.

The funding ask was the result of recommendations from the Southern Resident Orca Task Force. The whales mainly feed on Chinook salmon. Their population has dropped to 74 orcas, as they face threats from a dwindling food supply, water pollution and vessel noise. The task force did not recommend breaching the dams.

In the budget, the stakeholder forum funding will be split between fiscal years 2020 and 2021.

"Should it be determined that it's time for the dams to be removed, then communities must have the opportunity to collaboratively develop a transition plan to ensure the region's needs will continue to be met. We must insist on a path forward that works for salmon and people," said Wendy McDermott, Puget Sound and Columbia Basin director of American Rivers, in a statement.

# Washington state lawmakers try to keep bridge replacement talks alive

Set aside \$35 million for I-5 project

By LAUREN DAKE  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Before the Washington state Legislature adjourned, lawmakers passed a transportation budget. And inside the \$9.8 billion two-year spending plan was \$35 million dedicated to renewed efforts to replace the Interstate 5 bridge.

The money will be used to open and operate an Interstate-5 bridge project office and help fund design work.

"It's time to put our money where our mouth is

and demonstrate how this process differs from past practices," Washington state Sen. Annette Cleveland, D-Vancouver, said in a statement.

Gov. Kate Brown, who has been in talks with Washington Gov. Jay Inslee about reviving a plan to replace the aging bridge, said Oregon is ready to join their counterparts across the river.

"Replacing the Interstate Bridge is critical to the economies and communities of both Oregon and Washington," Brown said in a statement.

Oregon's Department of Transportation will have a staff member join the new office and work with Wash-

ington to start the process of reviewing what work might still be relevant from the defunct Columbia River Crossing project.

The money, however, is a pittance compared to the overall cost of planning and building a bridge.

Lawmakers in Oregon remain reluctant to engage with their Washington counterparts after Washington torpedoed the approximate \$3 billion Columbia River Crossing project in 2013. An Oregon-only effort to replace the bridge connecting Portland to Vancouver fizzled a year later.

Since then, talk of replacing the 100-year-old bridge has been a divisive topic. It's

taken years for Washington lawmakers to prove to their Oregon counterparts they are committed to the effort.

And bridge fatigue remains strong.

Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Eugene, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee, chuckled when he heard the \$35 million figure.

"We'll let them study it," Beyer said of Washington lawmakers.

Later, he added, "If they want to talk, we'll talk. But we won't put the time and money into it. It's their turn."

The new effort could, however, stave off the federal government from recalling a chunk of money for

the Columbia River Crossing. Both states must show the federal government they are making progress on the project or Oregon would owe about \$93 million and Washington would owe \$54 million.

Initially, it appeared as though Washington might pass a spending bill that included \$450 million for the Interstate 5 bridge project, but the measure didn't pass the Legislature.

One of the sticking points

in the last project was over light rail. Residents in southwest Washington have been vocally opposed to light rail, while political leaders in both states have maintained it should be part of any new bridge.

Brown has called the existing bridge over the Columbia River a "seismic risk, a freight bottleneck, a barrier to effective public transportation and a source of some of the worst gridlock in the nation."

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