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OUR VIEW

# Ingenuity needed on salmon

‘Hollow regret is all we can offer to the species we’ve hustled off into extinction — from the clouds of passenger pigeons that once filled America’s skies to the faintly ridiculous dodo birds of the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. If wild salmon and steelhead are to avoid the same fate, meaningful decisions must be made now.”

Since we wrote those words in 2006 there have been a few fairly decent years for salmon returning to spawn in the Columbia-Snake watershed. There also have been dismal years, as 2020 is shaping up to be.

Fourteen years ago, we were confident that part of the answer is restoring a free-flowing lower Snake River:

“Thanks to relatively effective fish ladders and other expensive mitigation measures, even damming the Columbia hasn’t proven fatal to the tough and tenacious salmon whose overriding biological imperative drives them upstream. No, it was the Snake River dams — the last four forced through the door before the nation wised up to the true costs of dams — that sent salmon into the downward spiral we witness today.”

We observed that wild salmon teeter on a filleting knife’s edge, with much riding on unpredictable ocean conditions.

“Posterity will judge us not on how cheaply we produced electricity, or how efficiently we operated a barge system to Lewiston, Idaho. Ten generations from now, our descendants will admire us or deplore us for decisions today about whether salmon survive or perish.”

It might not have been excessively cynical to wonder a couple of decades ago whether powerful economic interests were playing a delaying game, dragging their institutional heels when it came to mean-



The Ice Harbor dam on the Snake River near Burbank.

AP Photo

*THIS IS NOT A TIME FOR TIMID HALF STEPS.  
IF THERE WAS A “DOOMSDAY CLOCK” FOR  
WILD SALMON LIKE THERE IS FOR NUCLEAR WAR,  
A FIRM DECISION TO LEAVE THE SNAKE RIVER  
DAMS UNTOUCHED MOVES THE HANDS  
WITHIN SECONDS OF MIDNIGHT.*

ingful action, at least hoping that wild salmon runs would collapse into extinction and thus eliminate the need for bypassing dams.

In reality, most people in the Northwest are willing to make sacrifices to help salmon. But as a new federal report makes clear, bypassing the Snake River dams helps salmon but comes with significant downsides. That the report comes out of the science-averse Trump administration will cause some skepticism. But taking the current political environment into account, it seems reasonably candid. The doubts it raises about reverting the Snake to free flows will provide plenty of cover for taking less ambitious steps.

Even among Washington state’s progressive upper echelon of politicians, there is discomfort at the idea of undamming the Snake. Everyone from the powerful wheat lobby

to union members employed in river-borne commerce would scream murder. In a time when we’re trying to eliminate fossil-fuel electricity, cutting back a significant source of hydropower would appear counter to conventional wisdom — even among urban voters with a hypothetical love for wild salmon.

The equation for dam breaching is also substantially altered by the seismic shift in federal courts in the past three years. Loaded with more business-friendly trial and appellate judges, the odds for positive outcomes have lessened for litigants in all kinds of environmental challenges. Even a change in president after this year’s election — if such a change occurs — wouldn’t make any near-term difference.

Salmon aren’t dodos. Superbly adapted to their environment, they thrived for thousands of years after

the arrival of humans here in the Pacific Northwest. Even after the 19th century’s decades of free-for-all harvesting, many Columbia-Snake salmon runs survived in numbers that make even the best returns today pale in comparison.

However much salmon runs once fluctuated before dams — perhaps due to natural ocean phenomena like El Niños — they’ve never had to overcome challenges like those arising in our times. Rapid changes in ocean chemistry, currents and temperatures mean that salmon spend a majority of their lives in a setting increasingly unlike the one in which they evolved. This can result in poor rates of survival and return despite all the meaningful steps that have been taken to restore freshwater habitat. Predator control, though controversial, also offers some continuing prospect for incrementally improving salmon survival.

Since bypassing dams appears unlikely anytime soon, what more can be done to help salmon, and the fishermen and orcas that depend on them? The new federal report offers little more than paltry suggestions centering on an incremental increase in “spills” — water earmarked for aiding salmon migration.

If altogether bypassing dams is off the table, far more aggressive secondary actions will be required. Finding such solutions will require ingenuity coupled with regional cooperation, possibly including costly and comprehensive engineering fixes that provide alternative pathways for migrating salmon.

This is not a time for timid half steps. If there was a “Doomsday Clock” for wild salmon like there is for nuclear war, a firm decision to leave the Snake River dams untouched moves the hands within seconds of midnight.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## ClimateUnity

Thanks to letter-writers Ted Messing, Joseph Stevenson and Roger Dorband, and guest columnist Jon Stewart (“#TimberUnity is a misnomer,” The Astorian, Feb. 29), for speaking up on the issue of state Republicans, and our own senator, Betsy Johnson, a Democrat, caving to a vocal minority of climate deniers, including the astroturf outfit #TimberUnity, which is funded by Stimson Lumber Co.

The idea of loggers and mill workers out demonstrating, in favor of saving the Koch brothers (owners of Georgia-Pacific Wauna Mill) from having to chip in to cover their own carbon footprint, is ridiculous. Pioneer labor activists in the Pacific Northwest would not believe it.

For more on the backers and sympathizers with #TimberUnity, please check out this link at Mother Jones magazine: bit.ly/2wFOnsg

I’m for “ClimateUnity.”  
WILLIAM BARNETT  
Astoria

## Housekeeping

In defense of the Republican walkout to stop the cap-and-trade (\$700 million) bill: A short legislative session is for housekeeping bills, not major policy decisions.

This bill would have had no significant effect on the world’s climate, but it would have raised a lot of money. It would have had a very negative effect on the economy of small town and rural Oregon.

Do we really want an exodus of over-taxed businesses and families, like what is happening in California?

JEAN HERMAN  
Astoria

## A better plan

I asked our Clatsop County commissioners to consider adding cap and trade to the agenda for a thorough review. Only two of five are interested in investigat-

ing the issues surrounding the current legislation.

Let me be clear that I am not denying that humans have an impact on the earth. Consider where most of our textiles come from for the clothes we are all wearing. Look outside Oregon’s green borders, and you will see the terrible impact we have on emissions and pollution through our purchases.

China, India and Indonesia have the most polluted rivers in the world. Those places play a much higher role in acidifying the ocean than Oregon ever could, with our best in class manufacturing and responsible stewardship of the land and sea.

This bill, in all its versions, thus far will imperceptibly impact the environment, while being detrimental to our economy and community.

Everything is hauled in by truck (Costco, Fred Meyer, local shops, etc.) and our finished products are hauled out by truck (fresh and processed seafood, lumber and paper products made at our mills). These bills will increase costs of the finished product to the point that they will no longer be competitive in the marketplace.

However, others less environmentally ethical will fill that market from outside Oregon. The bill calls that “leakage.” Our friends’ and neighbors’ businesses would be leakage, with no benefit to the earth’s changing climate.

Our children and grandchildren do deserve better, a better plan that considers environment, economy and community.

KATY PRITCHARD  
Astoria

## \$14,300 per day

Democracy requires honest and transparent governance and a shared belief in democracy. Oregon’s Republican legislators are honestly and transparently showing their disrespect for Oregonians, good governance and democracy.

Rather than vote on a climate and jobs bill developed by both political parties over nearly a decade, all but two Republi-

can legislators walked out and stopped virtually all legislative business. Instead of doing the jobs they were elected to do, and are getting paid to do, the Republicans are thumbing their noses at us.

The Republicans are honestly and transparently showing their willingness to undermine democracy when they don’t get their way. The walkout is costing taxpayers at least \$14,300 a day, according to the Legislative Revenue Office.

The walkout has left dozens of important bills and millions of dollars stranded in committees. Those bills would fund flood recovery in Umatilla County, Oregon’s understaffed child welfare program and the nearly broke forestry department. Other bills left hanging would cap patient costs for insulin, require safe gun storage and reform campaign finance laws. Nearly every Oregonian is affected by this walkout.

Please thank our local legislators for staying on the job. State Sen. Betsy Johnson, a Democrat, agrees with the Republicans about this climate bill, but stayed at work. State Rep. Tiffany Mitchell, also a Democrat, stayed at work, and even hosted online town halls during the session.

It’s up to us to elect people who respect Oregonians, good governance, and democracy.

LAURIE CAPLAN  
Astoria

## Never forget

In general, as an employee, if you refuse to show up for work because you don’t like the assignment you have for the day, you’re fired.

If you’re a member of the military, and you refuse to man your post, you’re dishonorably discharged. If you’re a sports team or individual who feels you can’t possibly win the game or match, and so does not show up to compete, you forfeit, and lose anyway.

But if you are an Oregon Republican politician, and you refuse to show up and do your job, not only do you not face any negative consequences, you still get paid,

at the expense of others, and you pat yourselves on the back for once again getting away with something.

What’s wrong with this picture?  
One last thing: You who have done this — never forget the precedent you have set, because someday the tables may be turned.

KATHLEEN MATTHEWS  
Astoria

## Our way

Republicans in the Oregon Legislature did it again. For the fifth time in the past two sessions, Republicans walked away from their jobs to prevent passage of bills they didn’t like. They feared they would lose the vote on Senate Bill 1530, the cap-and-trade bill supported by Democrats, the governor and many Oregonians.

The Republicans’ mantra seems to be, “Our way or the highway.” But in this case, with Democrats dutifully staying on the job, it’s the Republicans who literally hit the road.

Because of an antiquated Oregon constitutional rule, the Republicans’ antics are not illegal, just undemocratic. The Senate and House need two-thirds of legislators present for a quorum, so the Republicans’ maneuver effectively ended the legislative session prematurely.

Their walkout is spit in the face of Oregon voters, Democrats and Republicans alike, who did their civic duty expecting the legislative process to go forward even if their party loses an occasional vote.

The walkout also postpones passage of bills on homelessness, wildfires and flood victim assistance, spending on child welfare, mental health and forestry. These postponements hurt all Oregonians.

President Donald Trump’s disrespect for democracy, frequently displayed by lying, disregard for the rule of law and stonewalling Congress, has trickled down to the petty Republicans of Oregon’s Legislature. They peep about between the great legs of their corporate sponsors, while digging their politically dishonorable graves.

ROGER DORBAND  
Astoria