

Salmon: ‘The fish ladders aren’t enough’

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“You place the entry where the fish want to be,” Bryan said.

Scanning fish

Another big advantage of the portal, Bryan said, is it can scan fish and identify which ones should be transported over the dams. That can help to keep out non-native species, such as shad, he said.

The lower Snake River is about as far inland as shad swim, according to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, an advisory group that develops a regional power plan and fish and wildlife program. Most of the annual run spawns downstream of McNary Dam on the Columbia River. The Columbia River now has the largest known population of shad in the world, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. The shad could increase competition for space and cause migratory delays. More study is needed, according to the Geological Survey.

On the Snake River, Army Corps of Engineers fish biologists said shad can cause problems, most often after they spawn and die. The dead fish can clog areas near fish ladders, although biologists said they don’t affect salmon passage in the ladders.

Bryan said the Passage Portal system could sort shad without people handling the fish. The system takes 18 photos of each fish less than a second after it has swum into the system. The pictures determine the species of fish, whether it’s injured or if it’s a hatchery or wild fish.

All of that data can help track the success of the system, Bryan said.

Fish that managers want to continue on then swim



A demonstration project at Chief Joseph Dam moved salmon over the dam. The dam has blocked the area to fish since it was built in the 1950s.

Whooshh Innovations

into the tubes without realizing they’ve left the river, Bryan said.

“Once the fish enters our system, they’re going to be delivered to the top of the dam and into the water in seconds,” Bryan said.

This could make salmon feel like they have a more natural swim upriver to spawn, Bryan said.

Helping fish now

This proposal isn’t meant to replace discussion on whether to remove or alter the four controversial dams on the lower Snake, he said. It’s more of a Band-Aid to help fish now, he said, while other plans are considered.

Those discussions, Bryan said, could take years to start to help salmon. A comprehensive \$33.5 billion proposal by U.S. Rep.

Mike Simpson, an Idaho Republican, to remove the Snake River dams could take 10 years.

“What can we do in those 10 years to make sure that there’s any fish left?” Bryan said.

Bryan estimated his company’s device could cost \$67 million.

Bryan said the technology has been proven. Last year, the Passage Portal system helped salmon navigate giant boulders in a remote part of British Columbia.

A massive landslide had blocked the Fraser River, with enough debris to fill 45 Olympic-size swimming pools, and prevented fish passage upstream.

To help fix the problem, according to Canada’s Fisheries and Oceans department, it awarded the

Whooshh Passage Portal system a \$4.45 million contract. The system moved about 8,200 salmon past the landslide.

“The technology worked well at moving fish efficiently past the barrier without handling, therefore reducing stress to fish,” said spokesperson Kavitha Palanisamy. “However, due to the very remote location; challenging weather conditions, including high water levels that disrupted operations; and construction difficulties, fish were not moved as far above the slide site as intended.”

Other emergency transportation measures included a concrete fish ladder, a fish wheel to capture salmon and a truck and transport system. In total, more than 161,000 salmon made it beyond the debris.

The Fraser River project was smaller in scale than what the company has proposed for all the Snake River dams, Bryan said. But, he said, it was technically more complicated because of the remote location of the landslide and emergency situation.

“Compared to what we did on the Fraser River, every project we look at now seems so straightforward,” Bryan said.

For example, in 2019 the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, with other state and federal agencies, demonstrated the same portal system at Chief Joseph Dam on the Columbia River. Fish haven’t been able to make it around the dam since it was built in the 1950s.

To bring salmon back to the blocked area, the Upper

Columbia United Tribes are studying salmon reintroduction to the upper Columbia River. The tribes have said one solution could be a Whooshh system. Other options could include trucking salmon around Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee dams.

While the lower Snake River fish ladders have helped fish move upstream, more needs to be done, Bryan said, especially as the climate warms waters and decreases water flows, making it harder on salmon to reach their spawning grounds.

“The fish ladders aren’t enough,” Bryan said. “At least when you have multiple dams in a row.”

Bryan said Whooshh Innovations could get a system up and running on the Snake River by 2023.

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