

# A federal agency contributes to salmon's decline

BPA has prioritized business interests

By **TONY SCHICK**  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Crystal Conant was camped for the night on a bluff overlooking the upper Columbia River in northeast Washington state, beading necklaces by the glow of a lantern.

The next morning, hundreds would gather at Kettle Falls for the annual salmon ceremony, held since time immemorial to celebrate the year's first fish returning from the ocean. Conant and fellow organizers needed necklaces for everyone who would come. Honoring the gift of salmon, she said, requires giving gifts in turn.

Behind them, friends and family had formed a drum circle inside the wooden husk of an old Catholic mission. Back when the salmon were still running up Kettle Falls, the sound of dozens of drum circles would have thundered across the plateau.

But there is only one circle now. And there are no salmon. The fish cannot get past two federal dams, masses of concrete each hundreds of feet tall. The construction of those dams, which began more than 80 years ago, rendered salmon extinct in hundreds of miles of rivers and destroyed the area's most important fishing grounds.

"The salmon still keep trying to come, and they come and they hit their little noses on the dam, over and over, 'cause they hear us calling," said Conant, a member of the Arrow Lakes and Sanpoil tribes. "So we're going to keep having our ceremonies and we're going to keep calling the salmon home until they get here."

After nearly a century without salmon, Conant and other members of upper Columbia River tribes want to reintroduce the fish into waters long blocked by the dams.

But there's been something blocking those efforts, too: the Bonneville Power Administration.

The U.S. government promised to preserve tribes' access to salmon in a series of treaties signed in the 1850s. Upholding those treaties now rests in no small part with Bonneville, a federal agency little known outside the Northwest that takes hydropower generated at Grand Coulee and other dams and sells it wholesale to electric utilities, primarily in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Decades ago, Congress placed the agency at the center of salmon recovery, giving it conflicting mandates: protect fish and fund their recovery, all while running a business off the dams that have reduced fish populations by the millions.

For decades, judges have admonished the federal government over its failure to do more to protect Columbia River salmon. Most recently, the Biden administration in March took the unprecedented step of acknowledging the harm dams have caused to Native American tribes and calling for an overhaul of Columbia River basin management. Bonneville, the government's moneymaking arm on the Columbia, is the federal agency involved in every measure the Biden team is discussing to save salmon.

But an investigation by Oregon Public Broadcasting and ProPublica has found that Bonneville has, time and again, prioritized its business interests over salmon recovery and actively pushed back on changes that tribes, environmental advocates and scientists say would offer the best chance to help salmon populations recover without dismantling the entire dam system.

The agency said it has invested heavily in supporting salmon and sacrificed revenue to make dams safer for fish. It said any limitations on its fish and wildlife measures are the result of financial pressures.

In response to the news organizations' findings, Bonneville spokesperson Doug Johnson said in a statement that the agency and its federal partners "will continue to participate in regional discussions on long-term strategies to address the protection and enhancement of salmon and steelhead," including the White House efforts.

"Ultimately, the region as a whole must continue to advance collaborative solutions to meet the needs of the Pacific Northwest," Johnson said. Two other federal agencies that work with Bonneville to manage the region's dams, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, issued statements identical to Bonneville's.

In an interview, Johnson said the agency has had to contain its fish and wildlife spending at levels it could sustain. "The statutes direct Bonneville to operate in a businesslike manner," he said. "Like any other business, we monitor projects in our budgets and make appropriate adjustments as needed."

Columbia River salmon recovery is one of the most expensive endangered species efforts in the country, costing Bonneville more than \$20 billion since it started in 1980. But while Bonneville's net revenues have surpassed targets in the last few years, it flatlined or reduced budgets for fish recovery at a time when, according to salmon advocates, more money is needed than ever to prevent extinctions of more Northwest salmon populations.

Proposals on the table, according to the White House and other participants in the talks, include breaching dams on the lower Snake River in southeastern Washington, funding the reintroduction of salmon into blocked areas and removing Bonneville from salmon management.

"We cannot continue business as usual," the White House memo said.

But on each of those three issues, interviews and documents show, business as usual is what Bonneville has tried to preserve.

## Building to a crisis

The Bonneville Power Administration began as a federal agency designed to run as a business. And, in many ways, that has never changed.

The agency was created in 1937, when Pacific Northwest hydroelectric dam-building had just begun and federal officials spoke openly about sacrificing salmon runs for the sake of developing cities and farmland. Bonneville was the government's way to market the dams' hydropower and electrify the rural West.

Although the dams are owned and operated by different agencies, Bonneville co-manages them, covering construction debts and operating costs with the proceeds from the electricity that the dams generate. Bonneville sells electricity to public utilities, which in turn sell it to homes and businesses. Today, Bonneville's operating revenues are more than \$3.8 billion per year. It manages power from 31 dams and owns about 75% of the Pacific Northwest's power lines.

But what was good for generating power was devastating for fish. In the mid-1950s, when wild Chinook salmon on the Snake River had to pass just one dam on their journey to the ocean, they numbered about 90,000. By 1980, seven



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

**Although tribes from throughout the Northwest no longer fish for salmon at now-submerged Kettle Falls on the Columbia River, they honored the spirit of the fish by passing out canned and smoked salmon at the First Salmon Ceremony in June 2021.**

additional dams later, the Snake River population had fallen to around 10,000.

In some places, like the Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph dams in northeast Washington, there is no way for fish to pass through at all, and the salmon are entirely gone upriver from the dams. While the rest of the federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers include ways for salmon to migrate past them, these passages still take a toll. Fish can get thrashed by turbines if they pass through the dam's powerhouse. They suffer in the warm and stagnant reservoirs that replaced free-flowing water when the rivers were dammed. And they fall prey to predators like sea lions, which have thrived in the conditions the dams created. Scientists say many fish that pass through multiple reservoirs and dams end up dying later on from the stress of the journey.

Faced with the possibility of federal agencies labeling salmon as endangered, Congress took action in 1980: It passed the Northwest Power Act, tethering the fate of salmon to that of the Bonneville Power Administration. The act required Bonneville to fund a comprehensive fish and wildlife program, and to "protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife to the extent affected by the development and operation of any hydroelectric project of the Columbia River and its tributaries."

The new law established conflicting mandates for Bonneville: making money from hydropower while helping save salmon from extinction. And by the 1990s, it was clear the measures were failing to rescue salmon. Several populations became listed as threatened or endangered and salmon advocates filed lawsuits over federal dam operations.

As part of an ongoing court case that has lasted decades, judges have ordered federal agencies, including Bonneville, to improve special passageways that allow fish to bypass dams' turbines. Judges also ordered the agencies to increase their "spill," meaning the amount of water they allow to flow past a dam instead of into its powerhouse; young salmon on their way to the ocean benefit from that spill, traveling faster past the dam with less likelihood of getting caught in a turbine.

But for Bonneville, every drop that didn't go through turbines was also wasted fuel and lost revenue — revenue it claimed it could hardly afford to miss out on.

In 2008, Bonneville tried to halt ballooning fish and wildlife costs and lawsuits with a series of funding agreements. The agency doled out \$900 million over 10 years to states and tribes for fish and wildlife restoration. But that money came with a catch: Signing the accords required a promise not to sue over management of the Columbia River power system. The accords also required signatories to affirm the adequacy of the federal government's fish and wildlife mitigation.

Only the Nez Perce Tribe and the state of Oregon declined the money. Along with a dozen fishing and environmental groups, they continued the long-standing challenge of federal dam operations in court.

As the case dragged on, Bonneville faced multiple pressures. It needed to raise its rates to pay for mounting fish and wildlife requirements ordered by the courts, but the Public Power Council, a coalition of consumer-owned public utilities that buy the bulk of its electricity, pushed back. The power council warned Bonneville that it would lose customers if it didn't curb its rising power costs, a third of which stemmed directly from fish and wildlife measures.

Then, while Bonneville was struggling to improve its finances, salmon fell further into crisis. By 2018, declines in salmon populations triggered an official warning from federal scientists. Scientists had set a threshold that, once crossed, was meant to put the government in urgent action mode to help the fish.

But at the same time, Bonneville was desperate to help itself.

## Shortchanging the fish

In 2018, the same year salmon declines were triggering federal alarm bells, Bonneville adopted a new strategic plan meant to fix its finances. It aimed to keep the agency's fish and wildlife spending from exceeding the rate of inflation; in some years, this spending didn't end up growing at all. Electricity markets also improved; the agency sold surplus power during times of peak demand like summer heat waves. And it kept expenses low.

Since then, Bonneville's net revenues have soared past agency targets. Last year, the agency's net revenues were \$360 million above its target. Halfway through 2022, it was on pace for an even better year.

"For the past four years, we've done fairly well financially," Johnson, the Bonneville spokesperson, said. "Five, six, seven years ago, our detractors were talking about the potential for us to go bankrupt because we had so much debt and we were doing so poorly financially. This found solid footing that we have financially is a recent development for us."

The agency used the unexpected revenues to shore up its cash reserves and lower rates for customers. It didn't put any of the windfall toward fish and wildlife programs.

In fact, after adjusting for inflation, Bonneville's current two-year budget for fish and wildlife is down more than \$78 million from what it was 2016-17, before the agency

adopted its new strategic plan. That came at a time when scientists said significantly more investment has been needed to give salmon a chance as the climate warms.

"Simply put," Andrew Missel, an attorney for the Idaho Conservation League, wrote in a 2021 brief to Bonneville about its budget process, "in the face of declining salmon and steelhead runs, BPA has decided to starve mitigation projects of needed funds, and has failed to even consider using an expected boon in revenue to help shore up those projects."

After fish and wildlife agencies told Bonneville its budgets were compromising their efforts, Bonneville announced in June it would increase fish and wildlife spending by about 8% in 2024 based on its assessments of what the program needed to remain viable. That increase would still put it below inflation-adjusted spending levels prior to 2018.

Jeremy Takala, a biologist and member of the Yakama Nation Tribal Council, said the tribe has shovel-ready salmon habitat restoration projects waiting for funding.

"It's really frustrating," Takala said in a July speech at a save-the-salmon rally in Portland. "BPA basically managing our funding source, it just does not make sense. It's a really, really huge conflict that frustrates the tribes."

Bonneville and its spending have factored heavily into negotiations between salmon advocates and the Biden administration.

Jim McKenna, an adviser to Gov. Kate Brown who is involved in the negotiations, said Oregon, tribes and salmon advocates are asking the administration to greatly increase funding for fish hatcheries and habitat restoration, and to put tribes and other local fish and wildlife biologists directly in charge of how to spend the money.

"The bucket of money is woefully inadequate," McKenna said. "And, Bonneville is not the agency that should be managing those funds."

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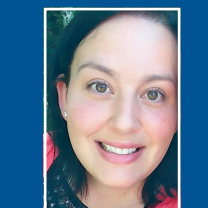
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