

Waterways association opposes breaching Snake River dams

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown’s support for breaching four Snake River dams as a long-term goal has sparked a strong rebuke from the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

Brown sent a letter to Washington Gov. Jay Inslee supporting removal of the dams, but not until the many issues related to it have been addressed.

“It’s an important statement that’s been made, and thus our concern for the incorrect information that’s in the letter,” said Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

The association advocates for navigation, energy, trade and economic development in the region and has argued that removing the dams would cost farmers and the region’s economy \$76 million a year.

“I believe restoring the lower Snake River must be a key presumption of our long-term solution for salmon and orca recovery, but much must be done before this is accomplished in order to help minimize and mitigate for potential harm to other vital sectors,” Brown said in her letter. “Among other considerations, this includes an affordable, nimble and reli-



Gov. Kate Brown talks with members of the media at the site of a breach in the Pendleton levee near McKennon Road in Pendleton on Feb. 14, 2019.

able power system that can help us to integrate renewables to meet our climate goals; continued water supplies for agriculture and municipalities; and efficient and affordable ways to get commodities to market.”

Brown’s letter restates misinformation that’s been circulating for several years about a supposed link between dam breaching and orca recovery, Meira said.

The dams are owned and operated by the federal government.

“This is very concerning because it does not appear

to comport with the latest information available from NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency of scientists dedicated to the recovery of both Chinook salmon and Southern Resident killer whales,” Meira said.

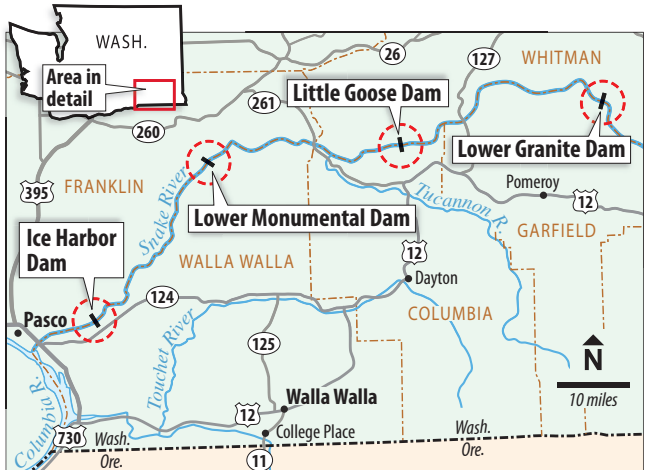
NOAA says a “whole suite” of actions is required for recovery of the three orca pods, Meira said.

“Extreme measures like Snake River dam breaching, which would have tremendous impacts on farming communities, (are) not necessary for the recovery of those whales,” Meira said.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

No single salmon recovery action on a single river would bring about recovery of the orcas, according to a 2016 NOAA fact sheet. It will require effective management of marine traffic near whales and improvements in the numbers of their primary prey, Chinook salmon.

A recent University of Washington study also found that 2,600 killer whales off the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska decimate the population of large Chinook salmon as they migrate southward toward Puget Sound, where the Southern



Population spends most of its time. The killer whales eat only Chinook salmon that is longer than 25 inches.

The waterways association’s focus is on the federal level, but — “When you have a state official insert themselves into something of this nature,” Meira said — it will reach out to organizations on a state level.

“This is a good opportunity to get the right information out there about what actually would benefit orcas,” Meira said. “(The focus on the Snake River dams) ends up being a disservice to those orca pods.”

In her letter, Brown also points out two actions that will benefit the salmon returns that some of the Southern Resident orcas eat.

One is the Flexible Spill and Power Agreement that

Oregon and Washington have signed.

“Hopefully we can work together to improve on that agreement, which will enhance survival of juvenile wild and hatchery salmon which translate into additional orca forage only two years later,” Brown wrote.

The other action is producing more hatchery Chinook salmon along the Columbia River.

“In recognition of this urgent need for orca forage, Oregon already has fish in the queue that could be available to orcas as soon as 2021,” Brown wrote. “I would like to partner with (Washington Gov. Jay Inslee) to help ensure this initiative is fully funded and sustainable during the necessary interim period while long-term solutions are addressed.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area

