

Feds plan update of salmon narrative

Study looks again at dam breaching

Two federal agencies that operate dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers are re-opening a 4-year-old study that rejected dam breaching to help save wild salmon and steelhead. The agencies are the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation.

They plan to update the 5,000-page Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement to consider new information that has emerged since the document was finalized in 2020.

The study that looked at the 14 federal dams on the two rivers to measure their impact on salmon and steelhead concluded that breaching the four lower Snake River dams would help the fish but the resulting reduction of regional hydro-power generation, and the elimination of tug-and-barge shipping between Lewiston and the Tri-Cities, would be too costly.

Instead, the federal agencies

adopted a plan that banks on spilling water at the dams combined with other actions to prevent threatened and endangered wild Snake River salmon and steelhead from blinking out.

Soon after, the Nez Perce Tribe, and Oregon and conservation groups sued the government, charging the plan did too little to help the fish. It was the latest round in a decades-old legal fight between the wild fish advocates and the federal government.

That battle took a new turn when the Biden administration agreed to settlement talks with the plaintiffs that eventually led to a 5-to-10-year pause in the litigation, and greenlighted studies and alternative energy development efforts that could pave the way for future breaching of the Snake River dams.

One part of the agreement included a commitment by the government to consider updating the 2020 environmental impact statement on the dams to wrap in new developments, such as the recent restructuring of the

60-year-old Columbia River Treaty that will change the way spring flood risk mitigation is managed.

The federal government’s tribal circumstances report released in June said development of the dams caused substantial and ongoing harm to Native American tribes in the basin. And a 2022 NOAA Fisheries report that said wild Snake River salmon can’t be recovered to healthy and harvestable levels without dam breaching. There has also been a series of studies that are just getting underway, part of the settlement agreement. These studies will examine ways to replace services provided by the dams, if they were

to be breached.

Shannon Wheeler, chairman of the Nez Perce Tribe, said a new look at the issue is critical and a chance to boost salmon recovery. “We are reassured to see strong support in the Northwest that no salmon extinction occurs on our watch,” Chairman Wheeler said. “This should be a fundamental feeling for all people in the Northwest and we are hoping it is.”

A coalition of dam supporters that includes representatives of the agricultural, shipping and power industries is asking the federal government to backtrack on its decision to reopen the document, calling it ‘premature and unlawful.’

“The justification for this study is not clear and won’t help any of the economic challenges millions of people in the Northwest including those in Idaho face from rising energy costs,” said Clark Mather, executive director of Northwest River Partners.

Prior to 1850 and the over-exploitation of the runs by commercial fishing followed by development of the hydropower system as many as 16 million wild fish returned to the Columbia River Basin annually. By the 1990s, that number dipped to about 1.3 million, according to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Over the past two decades the return has climbed to 2.3 million.

Power, Conservation Council reports salmon return progress

The raw number of adult salmon returning to the Columbia River has increased over the past 40 years, but is still not meeting regional mitigation goals, and wild fish protected by the Endangered Species Act remain at risk of extinction.

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council reported that an average of 2.3 million adult fish returned to the basin from 2014-23.

That is on par with the 2004-13 average of 2.4 million but dramatically higher than the 1.3 million average recorded in the 1990s.

That some fish are struggling is an understatement, according to fisheries officials from the Nez Perce Tribe’s Fisheries Resources Management.

Department Director David Johnson and Jay Hesse, director of biological services, point out that while the council’s program has helped the tribe and other fish and wildlife managers im-

prove hatchery production and fish passage at dams as well as restore habitat, many wild populations are at dangerously low levels.

“Wild fish populations in the Snake River Basin are on the brink of extinction and hatchery programs are not meeting their mitigation goals,” Hesse said.

“About 7,500 wild spring and summer chinook salmon returned back to the Snake Basin in 2024,” he said, “That is about 40 percent of the populations having 50 or fewer wild fish—a level considered quasi-extinct.”

Johnson said the increased number of adult fish is being driven, in part, by fall chinook and sockeye that return to the middle and upper sections of the Columbia River.

Tucannon River spring chinook are in such dire condition that some of those fish are held in a gene bank, he said.

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