

‘Getting (salmon) past the dams is critical’

SALMON continued from front page

While the Corps is complying with a court order for drawdowns now, that’s not part of its long-term plan.

Advocacy by the Tribe and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has “been falling on deaf ears,” Tribal Council member Kathleen George said.

“Getting (salmon) past the dams is critical,” George said. “There are certainly small things we can do here and there, but if you look at a population size difference, the real solution is the habitat on the other side of those 13 dams. ... If we do not do that, we have no reason to expect we will not continue to see declines in the salmon population year over year.”

Yet in October 2023, in a report titled “Killing salmon to lose money,” ProPublica and Oregon Public Broadcasting reported that the Corps is instead developing a new \$1.9 billion plan to truck juvenile salmon around the dams, rather than using drawdowns for the long term. The headline was taken from a sentence in a letter the Tribe filed with the Corps in February 2023.

“Killing salmon to lose money deserves a deeper analysis,” it stated.

The article noted the drawdowns “cost next to nothing, would keep the Willamette Valley dams available for their original purpose of flood control and has succeeded on a river system before. This approach is supported by Native American Tribes and other critics.”

It continued, “The Corps ruled it out as a long-term solution for most of its 13 Willamette River dams, saying further reservoir draw-

downs would conflict with other interests” — including hydropower. The Corps’ effort to keep its dams running full-bore is a story of how the taxpayer-funded federal agency, despite decades of criticism, continues to double down on costly feats of engineering to reverse environmental catastrophes its own engineers created.”

The Corps has responded by saying it is complying with the court order to improve fish passage and water quality.

“All injunction-related operations are being implemented, including the fall deep drawdowns at Lookout Point and Green Peter dams, which began in 2023,” it stated on its website.

The agency put out a press release highlighting an unfortunate effect at Green Peter Reservoir, where 8,000 kokanee salmon died in October 2023. Kokanee, which are landlocked sockeye salmon, are not endangered or native to the reservoir. They are stocked there for fishing.

The Corps blamed an injunction issued by U.S. District Judge Marco Hernandez in 2021. Hernandez noted in his ruling that the Corps had spent the previous decades refusing to implement orders from the National Marine Fisheries Service to draw down reservoirs to improve passage for spring Chinook and winter steelhead.

“At this time of year, fish would historically pass through the dam using a higher-elevation outlet called a penstock, but a 2021 court injunction outlined operations for moving fish through a lower-elevation regulating outlet this fall,” the Corps stated.

George said the kokanee die off

does not change the Tribe’s position on drawdowns.

“Time is running out and reservoir drawdowns are an important tool to allow juvenile fish safe passage downstream,” she said. “For many of us, seeing the reservoirs drawn down is a change. But we know that we cannot continue with the status quo — the numbers are dire and we must use every tool in our toolbox before it is too late.”

Dam removal efforts ‘commonly based on political dynamics’

In 2021, the International Journal of Water Resources Development published a report by Alexander C. Nagel & Thomas Ptak analyzing the dams.

Although research has shown for years that dams cause environmental problems, they continue to “occupy a central position” in policies and discussions about river management, the report stated.

So many administrative and regulatory bodies have been created to deal with dams that efforts to remove them “are commonly based more on political dynamics than scientific analysis,” despite “a strong body of evidence detailing how dam structures pose direct impacts to the biological, chemical and physical properties of rivers and riparian ecosystems.”

The dams also create a financial benefit for both the Army Corps of Engineers and the federal government, providing strong incentive to keep them.

The report continues that “Biologists estimate that even structures hosting adequate fish ladders for passage precipitate species losses of between 5% and 13%” and “In the most severe cases, an absence

of fish ladders has resulted in 85% declines for anadromous fish runs throughout the Willamette and its major influents.”

Adding fish ladders would be difficult.

“The combination of concrete buttress and earth-filled arch dams are located predominantly in narrow canyons, ideal for harnessing electricity, yet challenging for retrofitting to accommodate fish ladders,” it stated. “Currently, no evidence suggests plans for the installation of ladders. ... the only meaningful efforts involve fish transport in trucks, which yields low rates of success.”

The report concluded that removing just four of the dams — Big Cliff, Cottage Grove, Dorena and Fern Ridge — would make a significant impact by eliminating structures with high fish mortality. Of those four, only Big Cliff and Dorena produce hydropower.

However, removing dams is controversial, expensive and takes years to accomplish. George said there is no time left to waste and the Tribe’s Salmon Strength Team sees the drawdowns as the most practical option. It is focusing its efforts on lobbying congressional representatives and the Bonneville Power Administration to pressure the Corps.

“Our ancestors lived in harmony with their environment and their resources,” George said. “There was no other way to live and I don’t think there’s any other sane way to live now. We have to live in right relationship with rivers and accept the responsibility that we have created problems for our salmon. And therefore, it’s our responsibility to fix those problems.” ■

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