

Replacing benefits of Snake River dams would cost billions

BY NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS
Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — The benefits provided by four giant hydroelectric dams on the lower Snake River in Washington state can be replaced if the dams are breached to save endangered salmon runs, according to a new report released Thursday, June 9.

But it would be expensive. Finding other ways to provide electricity, irrigation and enabling commerce would cost between \$10.3 billion and \$27.2 billion, said the report commissioned by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

The draft report does not make any recommendations on whether the four dams should be breached. A decision on that divisive issue is expected later. Instead, the report allows the public, tribes, river users and other stakeholders to provide input over the next month that will inform that decision.

“We continue to approach the question of breaching with open minds and without a predetermined decision,” Inslee and Murray said in a press release.

“Every community in the Pacific Northwest knows the value and importance of our iconic salmon runs — and every community recognizes the importance of salmon to our economy and cultural heritage,” they said. “We each remain firmly committed to saving our salmon.”

Breaching the dams would significantly improve the ability of salmon and steelhead to swim from their inland spawning grounds to the Pacific Ocean, where they spend most of their lives, and then back to their original spawning grounds to procreate and die, the report said.

Major benefits of the dams



The Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River is seen from the air near Colfax, Washington. The record-shattering heat wave in the Pacific Northwest has prompted fishing and conservation groups to ask a federal court to order more spill from dams on the lower Snake and Columbia Rivers next spring to aid the migration of endangered salmon and steelhead runs.

include making the Snake River navigable up to Lewiston, Idaho, allowing barges to carry wheat and other crops to ocean ports. Eliminating the dams would require truck and rail transportation improvements to move crops, the report said.

The dams also generate electricity, provide irrigation water for farmers and recreation opportunities for people, the report said.

The dams have many supporters, including two GOP members of Congress representing eastern Washington state. The dams are also supported by barge companies, farmers and other business interests. Breaching them would require an act of Congress.

Republican U.S. Reps. Dan Newhouse and Cathy McMorris Rodgers of eastern Washington introduced a bill on Thursday to protect the dams, which are located in their districts. “Breaching the four lower Snake River dams would be harmful to our communities, our environment, and our economy,” Newhouse said.

“What’s alarming is trying to breach them at a time when families in Eastern Washington are paying record-high energy costs just to keep the lights on this summer,” McMorris Rodgers said.

But the chairman of the Yakama Nation said the dams must be breached.

“Our people are salmon people,” said tribal council chairman Delano Saluskin. “When the salmon thrive, we thrive; but when they suffer, our people suffer too.”

Exploring the Columbia River Basin in 1805, Lewis and Clark wrote of waterways so full with salmon that you could all but walk across on their backs.

In the late 1800s, up to 16 million salmon and steelhead returned to the Columbia River Basin every year to spawn. Over the next century and a half, overfishing whittled that number down. By the early 1950s, just under 130,000 Chinook were returning to the Snake River.

Construction of the first dam on the lower river, Ice Harbor, began in 1955. Lower Monumental followed in 1969, Little Goose in 1970, and Lower Granite in 1975. The dams stretch from Pasco, Washington, to near Pullman, Washington, and stand between migrating salmon and 5,500 miles (8,850 kilometers) of spawning habitat in central Idaho.

The dams have fish ladders, but too many of the salmon die as they swim through the dams and across slackwater reservoirs on their migrations.

In 1991, Snake River salmon and steelhead were listed as endangered species, requiring production of a fed-

eral recovery plan. Over the next three decades, environmental organizations sued the federal government six times, arguing that the recovery plan was inadequate.

The most recent lawsuit, in 2016, resulted in a four-year study of the environmental impact of the dams. Although it found that breaching the dams would be the most effective salmon recovery action, federal agencies ultimately decided against it.

The U.S. government has spent more than \$17 billion trying to recover Snake River salmon, through improvements to fish ladders and other measures, with little to show for it. In 2017, the number of Chinook salmon returning to the Snake River dropped below 10,000.

The loss of the salmon population also hurt the endangered Southern Resident killer whale population. More than 90% of the whales’ diet is salmon, and they need to eat between 350 and 450 pounds (158 and 204 kilograms) of fish a day to survive.

Dam supporters blame declining salmon runs on other factors, such as changing ocean conditions.

Last year, U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, unveiled a competing \$33.5 billion plan to bring back Snake River salmon. It has bogged down, failing to win support from other Republicans, Democrats and some environmental groups.

The centerpiece of Simpson’s plan is breaching the four dams, at a cost of up to \$1.4 billion. The rest of the money would go toward replacing the renewable electricity the dams generate, improving salmon habitat, and helping farmers who rely on the dams for irrigation and barge transport of their crops.

Wildlife rehabilitation centers to stop accepting waterfowl due to avian flu risk

BY CHARLET HOTCHKISS AND JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Blue Mountain Wildlife Executive Director Lynn Tompkins said she is optimistic the recent avian flu outbreak soon could come to an end.

The last time Oregon experienced an avian influenza epidemic was 2014-15, Tompkins said, and it ran its course by the end of June.

“This time it’s worse,” she said. “This is a lot more significant outbreak.”

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on Thursday, June 2, reported many wildlife rehabilitators are not accepting waterfowl due to the spread of avian flu in wild birds. Because waterfowl can carry the virus without showing symptoms, allowing them into rehabilitation facilities can put all the birds at the facility at risk.

“I’m really hoping the summer heat will help,” she said.

Tompkins said Blue Mountain Wildlife doesn’t normally get much waterfowl in this area, but the Tri-Cities do. She also stated Blue Mountain Wildlife no longer is accepting sick birds of any kind, due to the risk of avian influenza.

Tompkins is trying to change this by adding three sheds outside their clinic for intake, evaluation and quarantine. That way, they can see which are sick and get them tested for avian influenza without jeopardizing the health of the other birds being seen at the clinic.

All birds tested for avian influenza first have their preliminary results confirmed by a state lab, according to Tompkins. In Oregon, that testing is in Corvallis at the Oregon Veterinary Diagnostic Lab, and in Washington, it’s in Pullman at the Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory. Labs then send results to the national center for confirmation, where they will be added to the USDA website.

Tompkins has tested only a few birds for avian influenza this year in Washington: two goslings, a Mallard duckling and a crow. She also said ODFW recently sent off a test for a bald eagle that was found at McCormack Slough in Morrow County near Irrigon. Results are pending for all of those tests.

Goslings, ducklings and adult waterfowl all can carry the virus. If you find healthy ducklings or goslings without a parent nearby, leave them alone and allow the parents to find them, ODFW requested. If you choose to interfere, they can be released at the nearest waterway. Injured ducks and geese



Samantha Castoldi, left, and Blue Mountain Wildlife Director Lynn Tompkins on Thursday, June 2, 2022, prepare to put a band on the leg of a healthy American kestrel at the Pendleton bird rehabilitation center. Construction displaced the bird from its nest.

Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Background on the avian flu

In Oregon, wild avian flu was first detected in Canada goose goslings at Alton Baker Park in Eugene, then in several red-tailed hawks in May. Detection of the highly pathogenic virus has occurred only in Linn and Lane counties, but the biologists expect it to spread over the next several weeks.

This virus has been documented in more than 100 species of wild birds worldwide since it was first detected in December 2021 in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. It was believed to have entered North America in an infected wild seabird or migrating waterfowl.

The virus circulating in Oregon and other parts of the world is very contagious among birds. It can sicken and even kill many species, including chickens, ducks and turkeys. Infected birds can shed avian influenza A viruses in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Susceptible species become infected by the virus after it is shed by afflicted birds.

Wild birds typically carrying the virus include waterbirds (such as ducks, geese, swans, gulls and terns), shorebirds (such as sandpipers), pelicans and cormorants. Dabbling ducks (such as mallards, pintails and wigeons) serve as reservoir hosts for avian influenza A viruses, although it often does not cause disease in these species.

The disease also can infect raptors (hawks, eagles) that prey on or consume sick or dead waterfowl. The wild bird species in Oregon most at risk from this strain of virus currently appear to be all waterfowl, shorebirds, eagles and scavenging species, such as crows and turkey vultures.

While very contagious and deadly for some birds, the risk to human health is low, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To see all confirmed cases of avian influenza in wild birds and domestic birds, visit the USDA’s website at bit.ly/3zcD-Dzw.

— Source: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

may be brought to an ODFW office for euthanasia. Call ahead if you are bringing in an injured duck or goose.

State fish and wildlife also urged the public not to collect or handle sick or dead wild birds but report the incident directly to a local ODFW office, the Wildlife Health lab at 866-968-2600 or email at Wildlife.Health@odfw.oregon.gov. Fish and wildlife staff will conduct surveillance and collecting/testing

sick and dead wild birds to monitor for the presence of the disease.

This is the time of year when goslings, ducklings and other young birds are commonly picked up and brought into rehab centers, according to ODFW. Well-intentioned people mistakenly think these young birds are orphaned because they may be temporarily separated from their parents.

“This year more than ever, it

is important to leave wild birds in the wild to give them the best chance for survival,” the state fish and game department urged. “If you see young ducks or geese, please keep pets under tight control. Not feeding waterfowl is also especially important during this time. In addition to commonly causing nutritional issues, feeding congregates animals and results in overcrowding and increased risk of disease spread.”

Commissioners consider applying funds to BMCC

BY JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Umatilla County commissioners are considering giving a possible second round of American Recovery Plan Act funding to Blue Mountain Community College.

The board discussed the matter at its meeting Wednesday, June 1, in Pendleton.

In discussions with the White House and the National Association of Counties, commissioners learned the goals of proposed new ARA funding. One of three major goals is workforce development.

The commissioners recognized considerable news about the financial status of Blue Mountain Community College, Umatilla County’s major source of workforce training. They discussed the status of workforce training opportunities to meet local economic needs, and how that related to the budget issues at the college.

“(Considering) workforce investment and BMCC’s funding problem, we might possibly want to do that with emergency funding,” Commissioner Dan Dorran said. “This is a great conversation. Columbia Basin economic indicators show where job needs are. BMCC does a great job. Their criminal justice training program is great. Besides their college transfer programs, they offer targeted training programs.”

The criminal justice program is one of the areas the college administration is proposing to eliminate to close what it says is a \$2 million gap in the 2022-23 budget. The administration’s proposal would eliminate 10 full-time instructor positions and several part-time teachers as well.

Dorran noted signs in Hermiston offering truck drivers \$80,000 to \$100,000. If the county were able to invest in BMCC, the school could partner with businesses in training programs.

Commissioner John Shafer agreed Blue Mountain is a “huge driver” of the area’s economy, citing Morrow County’s application of its gift from Amazon Web Services to the college. “You see help wanted signs all over,” Shafer said. “We have county positions open.”

Shafer said the commissioners have expected the second half of Umatilla County’s \$15.1 million ARA grant since May 11. However, the county still is waiting for that \$7.5 million to arrive.

“They’re losing enrollment in some programs,” Commissioner George Murdock said of BMCC’s budget situation.

Given Murdock’s “strong conduit” to the college, his fellow commissioners suggested he open discussions with BMCC President Mark Browning. Murdock preferred that all three commissioners sit down with Browning.

“We need to make it clear that we don’t want to get in the middle of negotiations,” he said.

The Blue Mountain Faculty Association, the union representing instructors at the college, and the administration have been trying to reach a compromise on the upcoming budget. The faculty contends it has a plan to avoid layoffs; the administration argues the instruction is top heavy, with more teachers than the college needs for the demand it has.

The BMCC board is scheduled to approve a new budget on Monday, June 6.