

Zippy Duvall, left, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, views juvenile fall chinook salmon Wednesday as part of the tour of the Lower Granite Dam.

Matthew Weaver/
Capital Press



National, regional ag leaders get look at lower Snake River dam issues

BY MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

LEWISTON, Idaho — Leaders of national and regional farm organizations rallied around efforts to protect the four lower Snake River dams last week, taking part in a day-long briefing on the role the structures play in the Pacific Northwest economy.

Among those joining the group were Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation — the nation's largest agricultural organization — and Chandler Goule, CEO of the National Association of Wheat Growers. Farmers shouldn't let their guard down when it comes to Rep. Mike Simpson's call to breach the Snake River dams in the name of salmon recovery, Goule warned.

Simpson's \$33.5 billion concept calls for breaching the four lower Snake River dams and mitigating affected communities and industries.

The idea is gaining momentum in Congress heading into the mid-term elections, Goule said.

Simpson, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, has not proposed any legislation, but he will work to insert the money into an appropriations bill without instructions to breach the dams, Goule said.

"If that money gets appropriated, then that gets him a much stronger hand to come back and actually get the dams torn down," Goule said.

Simpson used a similar tactic on another issue 10 years ago, Goule said.

"He already knows politically that strategy is going to work," Goule said.

It would likely be in next year's appropriations, Goule said. The bill would have to go through the House and Senate,

and the president would have to sign it.

Duvall, Goule and 43 others representing ag organizations, co-ops and related businesses were hosted by the Idaho Grain Producers Association and the Idaho Farm Bureau.

Tour participants took a boat through a navigation lock and toured the dam complex, seeing fish ladders and juvenile and adult fish, and toured the Lewis-Clark Terminal, owned by CHS Primeland, the Pacific Northwest Farmers Co-op and Uniontown Co-op.

Agricultural advocates say breaching the dams isn't the "silver bullet" for salmon recovery that environmentalists claim, noting that mortality rates on the Snake River are similar for salmon elsewhere on the West Coast.

"I didn't see today the problems that (Simpson) described. ... I didn't see the science that supported that," said Duvall, of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Duvall compared Simpson to a doctor who calls for a heart transplant when some medicine will do.

"If we think about the \$34 billion and just take a portion of it, put it in research and development of the other problems that might be facing the salmon, we can fix that problem with a little medicine rather than transplanting a heart," Duvall said.

Breaching the dams would make the lower Snake River "completely unnavigable," and require adding 38,000 more rail cars or 150,000 more trucks to replace barges, Goule said.

About 60% of Washington's and Idaho's wheat is shipped by barge, according to the Lewis-Clark Terminal. It takes 5 1/2 hours to load one 3,600-ton barge, the equivalent of 120 truckloads of wheat.

A proposed transportation credit or subsidy under Simpson's plan could also potentially be out of compliance with World Trade Organization regulations, Goule said, adding that it could be considered trade-distorting, undercutting export competition.

The dams are critical for the West Coast's export and import markets, said Jeff Van Pevnage, president and CEO of Columbia Grain International in Portland.

Some 60-65% of the wheat exported using the Columbia-Snake River system originates in the Lower Snake River region, consisting of 13 barge facilities with more than 10 owners, Van Pevnage said.

"Without the current volume, you will endanger the economic viability of at least two of the export facilities that exist in Portland," Van Pevnage said. Those facilities rely heavily on barges and don't have the ability to expand rail capacity, he said.

Barging provides transportation competition and alternatives to keep freight rates in check, Van Pevnage said. Without it, rail costs for grain shipments to Portland could potentially more than double, particularly during the fall, when corn and soybean shipments from the Midwest are also heavy.

Without barging, many regional farmers could find themselves in a "captive shipping" scenario, similar to one experienced today by Montana farmers, Van Pevnage said.

"As an example, at times today, you can ship wheat from eastern North Dakota through Montana to the West Coast for cheaper rates than you can ship from Montana to the PNW," he said. "It's very possible those types of scenarios will exist here without the competition."

Legislature

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Dollar details to come: More than 78% of Oregon voters approved Ballot Measure 107 in November 2020, amending the state constitution to explicitly allow regulation of campaign finances. A 1997 voter measure placing caps on giving was upended by the Oregon Supreme Court's ruling that it ran afoul of the broad interpretation of free speech guarantees that go beyond even the U.S. Constitution. Oregon remained one of five states without contribution limits. But how much is too much bogged down placing numbers on the limits during the 2021 session as competing visions stalled amid the flood of legislation. "Something as comprehensive as what was being talked about is going to be really difficult to pull off," Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego said last week. Legislative leaders say they will try again next year.

Half full: Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen appeared Thursday for a final time during the 2021 session at a virtual meeting of the Subcommittee on COVID-19. Allen said OHA was happy to report that half of the 4.24 million Oregon residents are now fully vaccinated. As of Friday, the state reported 68.5% of eligible adults had received at least one vaccine

shot. When over 70% have one shot statewide, Gov. Kate Brown has promised to lift nearly all remaining pandemic restrictions. Allen told the panel that OHA remains concerned about virus infections spreading rapidly in counties with low vaccination rates once the statewide limits are off.

Vaccine count: OHA said Friday that 51,616 people need to get a first shot of vaccine in order to pass the statewide 70% mark. Counties can move into the lowest level of restriction earlier by getting one shot into 65% of residents.

Least vaccinated: There are 15 counties that have put a shot into less than half their eligible adult population. Some of the counties with the lowest percentages are sparsely populated, such as Lake, Malheur, Gilliam and Harney. From the standpoint of sheer numbers, the biggest unvaccinated pools of people are in two populous southwest counties. Jackson is 24,108 short of 65%, while Douglas is 20,291 from the mark. Third is Umatilla County, in the northeast, which needs 16,173

more shots.

Going, going...? Under the constitution, the Legislature must adjourn no later than next Sunday, June 27, at 11:59 p.m. How much sooner they will wrap up is part of a rumor mill hobbled by the lack of opportunity for lawmakers, staff, lobbyists, journalists, activists and others to trade information in the Capitol hallways.

The legislature's computer system shows bills scheduled for floor votes in both chambers on Monday and Tuesday. On Friday was one interesting item of interest: Senate Concurrent Resolution 24 was scheduled for a hearing and work session in the Senate Rules Committee at 9 a.m. on Tuesday. From there it could swiftly move to the floors of both chambers.

Despite its random numbering, this resolution by this time of the year is the favorite of nearly all involved. It is the final piece of legislation that lawmakers will vote on in the 2021 regular session.

It calls for adjournment "sine die," Legislaturespeak for "without future date."

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