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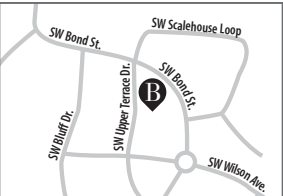
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LOCAL, STATE & REGION

Upper Columbia River Basin

SAVING THE SALMON

Tribes holding out hope of fisheries recovery

BY ERIC BARKER • Lewiston (Idaho) Tribune

Spokane — With the thousands of miles of quality salmon habitat in the upper Columbia River, a restored chinook run there could add significantly to the number of anadromous fish in the entire basin.

The tribes of the upper Columbia River Basin — the Coeur d'Alene, Spokane and Colville, along with first nations in Canada — aim to do just that. But it's tricky. Audacious even. Consider that salmon and steelhead that return to the Snake River are struggling in large part because of the eight dams they must pass. Those eight dams, four on the Columbia and four on the Snake, all have adult and juvenile fish passage facilities. There's honest debate about how well they perform. Many scientists say each of the dams takes a toll and eight is too many, thus their call to remove the four dams on the Snake River as a needed measure to save wild Snake River salmon and steelhead. But adult fish that return to the upper Columbia River also will have to pass eight dams before they get to Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee — two massive hydroelectric dams without fish ladders. Juvenile fish must make their way through turbines on the two big dams and over spillways or through turbines on three small Avista Corp. dams on the Spokane River, all before passing eight more on the middle and lower Columbia River.

'A daunting task'
How is that possible? Or rather, is it possible? The tribes think so and in March they were in the second phase of a four-phase project to figure out how to make it happen. They must do so without the power of the Endangered Species Act. "We are talking about passing fish across five dams that don't have fish passage. For sure it's a daunting task but, you know, that is probably why it hasn't been tried yet," said Tom Biladeau, nonresident fisheries program habitat restoration biologist for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

"If it were simple, someone would have done it. But the tribes are really committed to making this happen and there are a lot of new or novel technologies out there that weren't available decades ago to pass fish across high-head dams, and when I talk about passing fish, I'm talking about juveniles going downstream and adults going back up." Fish have been missing from the Coeur d'Alene territory for a century. But they used to spawn in places like Hangman Creek and other tributaries to the Spokane River. Spokane Falls, an impassable barrier on the Spokane River, was a destination for several tribes. "Salmon and steelhead would hit there and, just like Celilo and Kettle falls, it would be a place all the tribes would come to harvest fish," said Aaron Penney, supplementation biologist for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

Grave warning
At last summer's Salmon and Orca Summit in Shelton, Wash., Coeur d'Alene tribal council member Hemene James offered a grave warning to the Nez Perce and other tribes of the Pacific Northwest working to preserve and improve salmon runs. "My people are relegated to getting fish out of the back of a truck," James said. "All of you who have salmon



TOP: Tobias Koch and Jill Hardiman pour a tub of fish that were soon to be released into the Spokane River in Plummer in March.



CENTER: Buckets of fish are handed off to Conor Giorgi to release into the Spokane River in March.



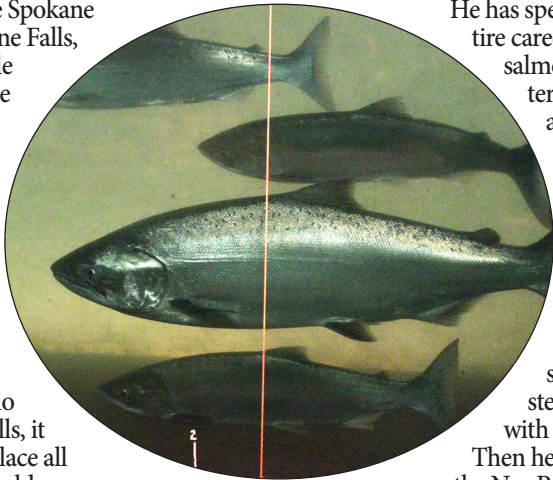
BOTTOM: Conor Giorgi, from left, Tobias Koch and Aaron Penney walk towards the Spokane River as they scope out a spot to release the fish in March.

August Frank/Lewiston Tribune

where salmon and steelhead can still reach. Ahead of them was Wells Dam, the first of eight where the fish could be detected. "We had more than 90 individuals detected downstream," said Conor Giorgi, anadromous fisheries manager for the Spokane Tribe. Farther downstream, 24 were detected at Bonneville Dam and four in the Columbia River estuary. In the summer of 2019, one of those fish, an adult female that was now fat and strong from feeding in the ocean, started swimming back upstream. "We watched her as she made her way up past each of the dams," Giorgi said. Eventually she entered the ladder at Chief Joseph Fish Hatchery beneath Chief Joseph Dam. A year later, three more adults from the same juvenile release were detected in the Columbia River. At least one was documented to have been harvested and it's probable the others were as well. Giorgi said the 750 juveniles released had a smolt-to-adult return rate of about 0.4%. Not a great survival rate in the big picture, but on par with return rates for threatened upper Columbia River steelhead that year. "Without any improvements to fish passage systems, just an impromptu release that we did, we got a lot of hope out of that," Giorgi said. "So we see a lot of opportunity, a lot of hope for this reintroduction effort. Yeah, it's disappointing we didn't get those three fish back but, at the same time, it also articulates the benefits of reintroduction. That we can have this cultural connection while also contributing to downstream fisheries where other people benefit as well, it's a lot bigger than just the upper Columbia River region."

A later release of 1,400 chinook smolts by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe showed about 90 of those fish survived downstream passage of all three Spokane River dams, as well as Grand Coulee, Chief Joseph and the eight dams on the middle and lower Columbia River. Phase 2 will be repeated and expanded to include adult tracking in future years, all in an effort to learn what can be done to help the fish. Giorgi said the tribes believe they can pull it off and do so without the benefits of the Endangered Species Act. "We are not telling anybody they have to do this. We are not asking for operational changes, we are not asking for increased drawdown, more spill, reduced irrigation water power, whatever. You maintain all of those current operations and benefits and let's see what we can get for salmon while still providing those services, and right now the outlook is optimistic."

should be freaking out. Excuse my language, you should be crapping your pants because you don't want to end up like us." The demise of upper Columbia River salmon started with the construction of Little Falls Dam northwest of Spokane. Then came Long Lake and Nine Mile Falls dams. "Those were the first ones that started depleting the salmon runs in the Spokane River," Penney said. "And when Grand Coulee went in, that was the nail in the coffin." He has spent his entire career helping salmon reclaim territory. For about two decades, the Nez Perce man worked on his tribe's efforts to supplement wild salmon and steelhead runs with hatchery fish. Then he managed the Nez Perce Tribal Fish Hatchery. Now, he's running a nascent hatchery program for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. "There is evidence reintroduction might be possible. The Spokane Tribes released 750 juvenile summer chinook in Chamokane Creek in 2017. "They had to go over Little Falls Dam or through Little Falls (Dam). They had to go into Lake Roosevelt, where there's all kinds of predators, and they had to go over Grand Coulee Dam — another dam without fish passage," said Tim Peone, resident fish hatchery manager for the Spokane Tribe. "Then they had to go through another reservoir and another dam without any kind of passage." That was all to reach the downstream side of Chief Joseph Dam and enter the "anadromous zone," an area



A chinook salmon, second from the bottom, swims with sockeye salmon at the Bonneville Dam fish-counting window near North Bonneville, Washington, on the Columbia River in June 2012.

Rick Bowmer/AP file

Life cycle model study

Grand Coulee Dam is a high-head barrier with no fish passage. Chief Joseph Dam was built downstream. It also has no fish passage. Together, the two dams are the electricity-producing workhorses of the region. So the effort is audacious. Undaunted by that, the upper Columbia River tribes are stepping up to the challenge. It starts with a long-timed study