

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

The following article is the opinion of the writers and does not reflect the opinions of Fishermen's News or Philips Publishing Group.

Why The Columbia River Matters to West Coast Fishermen

Fifth salmon plan failure gives feds a chance to do something different

By Joel Kawahara, Glen Spain

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS, THE WEST Coast has a golden opportunity to push for a serious Columbia River salmon recovery plan that finally does something real to address the devastating impacts on fisheries of four federal dams on the Snake River.

This chance to finally get it right comes after decades of trying to fix a broken system.

After decades of dam building, four final dams – Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite – were built on the Snake River, the Columbia River's largest tributary, in the 1960's to 70's. Before they were constructed, Washington's Department of Fisheries warned that the Lower Snake River dams would spell trouble for salmon:

"The development would remove part of the cost of waterborne shipping from the shipper and place it on the taxpayer, jeopardizing more than one-half of the Columbia river salmon production in exchange for 148 miles of subsidized barge route . . . This policy of water development, the department maintains, is not in the best interest of the over-all economy of the state. Salmon must be protected from the type of unilateral thinking that would harm one industry to benefit another . . . Loss of the Snake River fish production would be so serious that the department has consistently opposed the four-phase lower dam program that would begin with Ice Harbor dam near Pasco." (From the State of Washington Department of Fisheries Annual Report for 1949.)

Unfortunately, that prediction made by the Washington Department of Fisheries in 1949 about the damage four Lower Snake River federal dams would do to our salmon fisheries has now come to pass. Once built, they proved to be simply four dams too many. The relatively minor economic benefits they provided were never justified, as compared to the enormous economic and social toll taken by lost fishing economies.

Salmon runs from the Columbia Basin are a significant part of ocean commercial salmon fisheries well south into California and north into SE Alaska. The first lawsuits over the fate of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmon runs in the Columbia-Snake River Basin started in 1992 – 24 years ago! PCFFA has been a Plaintiff in most of these suits.

Each of the first four "Columbia River Salmon Plans" (in the form of Biological Opinions – BiOps – as required under the ESA) has been declared by the federal Courts to be "arbitrary and capricious," unsupported by either law or science.

But most recently, on May 4th, 2016, US District Court Judge Michael Simon in the District of Oregon issued a ruling that invalidated the federal government's most recent (fifth) try at a legal Columbia River Salmon Plan, ruling that this latest plan – just like the four that came before it – also doesn't do enough to protect endangered wild salmon.

The Judge's opinion sent the federal agencies back to the drawing board to create a new plan, and to find a way to ultimately correct a system that, in his words, "cries out for a major overhaul." Among other things, Judge Simon (two prior Judges on this case having retired) pointedly noted:

"More than 20 years ago, Judge Marsh admonished that the Federal Columbia River Power System 'cries out for a major overhaul.' Judge Redden, both formally in opinions and informally in letters to the parties, urged the relevant consulting and action agencies to consider breaching one or more of the four dams on the Lower Snake River. For more than 20 years, however, the federal agencies have ignored these admonishments and have continued to focus essentially on the same approach to saving the listed species—hydro-mitigation efforts that minimize the effect on hydropower generation operations with a predominant focus on habitat restoration. These efforts have already cost billions of dollars, yet they are failing. Many populations of the listed species continue to be in a perilous state."



“The option of breaching, bypassing, or removing one or more of the Snake River dams may be considered more financially prudent and environmentally effective versus spending additional hundreds of millions of dollars on uncertain habitat restoration.”

The removal of the four lower Snake River dams is now firmly on the table, but this time under Court Order. Many scientists, including the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (AFS), have already found Snake River dam removal to be the single most effective step that could be taken to rescue the Columbia Basin’s endangered and threatened salmon runs. But the federal action agencies have, to date, done their very best to ignore both the science and the law by refusing to even consider the dam removal option.

The Court gave the action agencies until March 1, 2018, to come up with a new Columbia River Salmon Plan. The Judge ordered the Corps conduct a full NEAP analysis, and to write an EIS where all alternatives are to be thoroughly considered. Anything less would not pass the legal laugh test.

Remember, the four lower Snake River dams were pre-NEPA and not built with a full environmental impacts analysis, but were built as a result of decades of persistent Congressional lobbying by Idaho development boosters and land speculators. Even the Army Corps of Engineers, in a comprehensive report in 1933, and then again in 1938, concluded that additional projects proposed for the Snake River would never even pay for themselves as projects, even ignoring major losses to fisheries damages. [For a history of the Snake River dams project, read *River of Life, Channel of Death*, by Keith C. Peterson (1995, Confluence Press, Inc.). The negative Corps of Engineer’s studies are cited at pages 88-90]. Ignoring both science and economics, Congress simply told the Corps of Engineers to build them anyway. And here, too, predictions that these dams would cost society more than the value of the minimal benefits they could provide have also come true.

The lower four Snake River dams generate relatively little power, amounting to only 4 percent of the Columbia’s federal power system base production, most of it during April-June runoff periods when it is least needed. That’s actually less than energy savings that could become available instantly through reasonable conservation measures. The dams also provide little or no irrigation water (only one dam provides any, for about 20,000 acres, that could easily be supplied by wells), nor do they offer any help whatsoever with flood control. The only major benefit any of these four dams ever provided is heavily subsidized river barge transportation. But even these transportation benefits could be cost-effectively replaced by existing railroads which, were it not for the large federal barging subsidy, would actually be a much cheaper transport system.

We also live in a changed economic environment. Lewiston, Idaho is no longer a major “sea port,” and most of its river transportation traffic is now gone. If the 4 percent of the region’s power generated by the four lower Snake River dams were to disappear, the loss would hardly be noticed. Several studies have shown how that power could be cost-effectively

replaced in ways that also restore the region’s valuable salmon runs.

The four lower Snake River dams were constructed by Congressional fiat, over the intense objections of commercial fishermen, Tribes, state agency biologists, coastal communities and even the US Army Corps of Engineers. Modern environmental protection statutes such as NEPA were not in place at the time. Had they been, the lower Snake River dams probably would never have been built.

Devastating Salmon Fishery Losses

Salmon declines in the Columbia have accelerated to the point where today nearly every mile of the Columbia River is affected by dams, and nearly every stock of what was once the largest salmon river system in the world is also now under federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Wild salmon runs from the Columbia Basin, once 10 to 16 million strong, have been reduced to only about 2 to 3 percent of those numbers today (less than 400,000 wild fish). Nearly half of this historical production was in the Snake River, now most of it lost behind the four lower Snake River dams and Hells Canyon Complex.

The West Coast salmon fleet once freely ranged the coasts from March until at least the end of October. Unfortunately, those kinds of seasons are no more. Conservation measures necessary to protect weakened Snake River fall-Chinook increasingly constrain salmon fishing all the way south to below Point Reyes, California. Columbia-driven fishing constraints have also hit the Southeast Alaska salmon fishery hard, with many past closures and Salmon Treaty mandated reductions today “justified” by ESA-listed Columbia Basin stocks. Columbia Basin-origin salmon harvested in Southeast Alaska still account for as much as 30 percent of the total salmon harvest in that region. Washington State has seen a loss of up to 90 percent of its Chinook harvest from 1975, the year the four lower Snake dams were completed.

Historically, the Columbia Basin produced an escapement estimated at 10 to 16 million adult salmon each year, with an average of 13.5 million adults. The total personal income impacts value of these historic runs, assuming a 50 percent harvest rate, was conservatively estimated as part of the analysis associated with the 2000 Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) Biological Opinion at approximately \$500 million/year. This bounty could have supported as many as 25,000 family-wage, fishing-based jobs, added to the economies of communities all the way from Central California to Southeast Alaska. However, during the 1990s, the economic value of Columbia-based salmon fisheries dropped to as low as \$2 million, only slightly improved today. The difference between those two numbers – nearly \$500 million/year and 25,000 jobs – is what the industrialization of the Columbia River has ultimately cost our industry and our fishing communities.

Limited by the Weakest Link

As every fisherman knows, because so many salmon stocks we depend upon intermingle at sea, our industry is



regulated on the basis of “weak stock management,” with the weakest stock becoming the “weakest link” or limiting factor for all other harvest opportunities.

Snake River fall-Chinook range widely. As a consequence, salmon fishermen all the way down to Central California have experienced reduced opportunities to harvest other stocks in order to protect south-migrating Snake River fall-Chinook. The same is likewise true in Oregon, Washington and Alaska.

Mismanagement of federal power dams, partial dewatering of rivers and decades of destruction of spawning and rearing habitat in the Columbia-Snake River Basin both directly and indirectly jeopardize the salmon fishing economies of the whole west coast, including British Columbia. This is why what happens to salmon in the Columbia really matters.

What Comes Next?

Federal agencies now have until March 1, 2018, to get the next Columbia Basin Salmon BiOp right. We need these agencies to follow the law, apply the best science, take input from the people of the region, and come up with a well-thought-out plan that offers a real solution.

To get it right, the agencies have to follow a process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that legitimately

analyzes every option on the table – and that also means taking an honest look at lower Snake River dam removals. Scientists have long held up this option as the best plan for saving salmon, and now it has also been specifically cited by the Court.

And finally, the voice of the fishing industry is important – Make sure it is heard. Let people know how Columbia and Snake River salmon declines have affected fishing industry livelihoods and communities from California to Alaska. Let’s demand that the federal agencies that got us into this mess move forward on fair, effective and lasting solutions – including, where it makes sense, the removal of fish-killing dams. **FN**

Joel Kawahara (joelkaw@earthlink.net) is a long-time salmon troller working offshore WA and AK, and a Board member of the WA-based Coastal Trollers Association and the Alaska Trollers Associations. He represents the Coastal Trollers Association on the PCFFA Board.

Glen Spain is the Northwest Regional Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations (PCFFA). PCFFA’s Northwest Regional Office can be reached at: PO Box 11170, Eugene, OR 97440-3370, by email to: fish1ifr@aol.com or by phone to (541)689-2000. PCFFA’s web site is at: www.pcffa.org.