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Federal agencies decide no summer spill

PORTLAND, Ore. – With this year’s Columbia River flows perilously close to the lowest year on record, the Bonneville Power Administration, in consultation with other federal agencies, has decided it cannot provide summer spill for migrating salmon.

Spill means diverting water through a spillway so that more fish can traverse a dam without going through its turbines. Spilled water cannot be used to generate electricity.

“Summer spill would reduce power system reliability to an unacceptably low level,” said BPA Acting Administrator Steve Wright. “With the Columbia Generating Station nuclear plant still down for maintenance and the July early-bird forecast down to a near record-low level, we simply cannot take that risk.”

On June 28, the Northwest River Forecast Center of the National Weather Service issued its July early-bird forecast of Columbia River runoff for January-July. It dropped by 2 million acre-feet (maf) from the June mid-month forecast to 53.9 maf at The Dalles. This is a mere 0.1 maf above the all-time record low of 53.8 maf set in 1977.

According to the operations plan for 2001 released by the federal agencies on April 13, Columbia River runoff needs to be at least 55 to 56 maf to be able provide spill for fish and meet system reliability criteria. The operations plan was extensively reviewed by tribes and state agencies.

The most recent analysis by the Northwest Power Planning Council shows about a 12 percent probability of power deficits next winter if additional water is stored at Grand Coulee and other Columbia Basin reservoirs prior to next winter. Not providing summer

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spill will facilitate storage of this additional water, therefore reducing the risk of power deficits in the region next winter.

In order to alleviate power reliability problems this summer, fall and winter, BPA has purchased short term load buy-outs from its customers, water from willing sellers and power from others when available. Elimination of summer spill for salmon comes in addition to a curtailment of spill for spring migrating salmon and steelhead, also based on the agencies' power emergency provisions in the operations plan.

"We regret having to limit our fish operations this year, but we need to assure power reliability for the summer, fall and winter, Wright said. "Where we can, we will take steps other than spill to help the fish survive in this critical year. This includes adopting a recommendation from the Council to fund about \$20 million in emergency projects to partially offset the impact of reduced spring spill on fish."

To identify emergency fish actions, BPA solicited projects from states, tribes and others in May. The Council recently reviewed the project proposals and recommended funding certain projects designed to improve conditions for fish that still are migrating and also to improve conditions in the tributaries for this year's juvenile fish when they return to spawn as adults.

The Council has endorsed BPA's commitment to fund the emergency projects that are over and above the agency's annual funding commitment to the Council's Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program of about \$140 million.

Several salmon and steelhead species migrate to the ocean in the summer, but only one of those species – Snake River fall chinook – is listed as endangered.

The agency remains open to additional measures that can help salmon this year. "We will continue to monitor market, streamflow and federal system conditions," Wright said, "to assess options for providing a limited amount of spill later this summer. During this time we will work to minimize impacts to endangered fish."

The Council has suggested that BPA could purchase power from outside of the region to provide spill for fish so long as those purchases meet BPA's established reliability and financial criteria. According to a recent Council analysis, the Northwest's power picture will continue to change with changes in power prices, resource operations and conservation actions, among other factors.

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