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IN OUR VIEW

KEEP SPILLING

Limited analysis spawns added push to curtail water diversion that helps fish

Spilling water to help fish get past Columbia River dams costs a lot of money — about $80 million in lost hydroelectric sales in an average water year.

But spending a lot of money and wasting a lot of money are two very different descriptions for the longtime practice.

Federal power managers are going with the "waste" descriptor. They have renewed energy for their argument given a recent calculation done by a Northwest Power and Conservation Council analyst.

The council, created by Congress with eight members appointed by Northwest governors, is commissioned to develop a 20-year electric power plan that guarantees reliable energy at the lowest economic and environmental cost to the Northwest, while protecting and rebuilding fish and wildlife populations hurt by hydropower.

That's a tall order, so we sympathize. But we are also concerned that the council has endorsed experiments in curtailing summer spillwater — which helps prevent young fish from being chowdered in turbines, thereby increasing adult returns — based on inadequate analysis and short-sighted thinking.

Council analyst Bruce Suzumoto found that for the $80 million in lost sales, as water is diverted from making electricity to offer salmon a safer slip-and-slide past dams, we may only be returning an extra 15 adult endangered Snake River fall chinook each year.

Ask most people if 15 fish, even endangered ones, are worth $80 million worth of power, and they'll say "no." But it isn't that simple.

First, this analysis only addresses the minimum possible benefit to one endangered fish run. Factor in benefits to other fish species, even healthy ones that taxpayers have invested in and would like to see stay healthy, and the fish count grows fast.

And consider this quote from Suzumoto. In regard to Snake River fall chinook, he told Columbian reporter Erik Robinson, "Quite frankly, we don't know an awful lot about these fish."

Learn more then, we say, before fueling a drive to fry more fish.

Lastly, we must place the 15-fish estimate in context with the fact that the return rate for salmon smolts in general is just 1 percent. Returning 15 fish for 1,500 smolts with the aid of the summer spill program isn't bad, given the challenges already facing smolts from predators and ocean conditions.

Power managers should be uncomfortable using this analysis, about just one fish species, to curtail the program. And before they do, they must explain why salmon smolts are less worthy of diverted water than irrigation, flood control and navigation water needs.

Not everything can be measured in dollars. Some things have to be measured in sense. Power customers don't own the river, and because money can be recouped more easily than endangered fish, we should stick with the spill policy and learn more about the wildlife the power council is ordered to protect.

IT'S IN THE P-I

A Hearst Newspaper
The voice of the Northwest since 1863

Sunday
Seattle Post-Intelligencer

FEBRUARY 22, 2004

P-I OPINION

Protect salmon if you want dams

"Two hundred years ago, Snake River wild salmon saved American explorers Lewis and Clark from certain starvation. Now these salmon balance on the edge of extinction themselves."

- Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition

In polite discussions, everyone agrees on the need for forward-looking Columbia River management, encompassing the needs of people, salmon and the environment. Federal agencies, though, may be ready to roll back the clock.

The Bonneville Power Administration is exploring possible changes in some Columbia and Snake River dams' summer spills. A spill is where water is allowed to flow over the top of a dam, instead of through turbines. This protects young salmon.

Reducing or eliminating the spills would be an extremely bad idea. Salmon protection efforts have been marginal, barely good enough to allow modest recovery of some runs. A federal judge has ordered better plans for fish protection, finding that the requirements of the Endangered Species Act haven't been met.

Whatever legal complications a change in summer spills might create, it would be a retreat from the promises of aggressive salmon protection that, supposedly, can prevent the need to remove any dams. It would also turn the Columbia a bit more into a massive holding pond rather than a river.

A desire to save money for electricity ratepayers is behind the interest of the BPA, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council and other agencies. That's a worthy goal. But it's hardly one that has been neglected in river operations. The steep increases in electric rates in recent years are the result of the scandalous push for electricity deregulation, not environmental remediation.

BPA administrator Steve Wright reportedly has put the spills' cost at $77 million. The agency says other steps, such as habitat protection, might save as many fish for much less.

But that ignores the effects on genetic stocks that could occur with any reduction in the population of wild salmon and other migrating fish. As the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission notes, letting juvenile salmon move downstream with a spill is the safest option. Anything else is a greater gamble.

Tribes and state agencies can be excused if they feel offended by BPA suggestions that restoration of some spending cuts on their programs would follow. River operations should be based on cooperation, not financial strong-arming on the part of the biggest player.

For all the talk in recent years about respecting the environment, tribes and fishing-dependent communities, the spill discussion reflects a view of the river as a hydro plant invented by 20th century know-how, not a great natural resource left to us to treasure. That's exactly how we got into trouble.

Juneau Empire

Letting dams off the hook hurts Alaskans

Thursday, March 4, 2004

Supporting troll fishermen around here is about as safe as siding with God and cheap electricity in Idaho. Living in Alaska puts me on the right side of that divide.

I don't exactly worship trollers, but my list of might-have-beens always starts with me reeling in king salmon and living on the sea. It's part of our mystique and, equally important, it's the reason some Southeast Alaska towns exist. It's a way of life that the last round of Columbia and Snake River salmon preservation kept intact, but that some Alaskans now rightly fear is endangered by environmental backpedalling.

It works like this. Government agencies charged with saving endangered salmon that spawn upriver in Washington, Oregon and Idaho crafted a plan in the 1990s requiring many conservation measures up and down the Northwest. One that fishermen, Alaska biologists and affected tribes particularly like is a requirement that the Bonneville Power Administration spill some summer water over the Snake River dams instead of through electric turbines, speeding young salmon toward the ocean from their upstream birthplaces.

To BPA it's lost money to the tune of $80 million a year that could be lightening Northwesterners' electric bills. To Sitka troller Eric Jordan, it's insurance that he'll be catching $100 kings in future seasons.

Now, with a court-ordered rewrite of the conservation plan in the works, BPA is making noises about summer spill. In the next few weeks the agency will make decisions about this summer's dam operations. Agency consultants and officials say it would be cheaper to cut the harvest at sea.

Cheaper for whom?

Jordan calls the idea a "travesty," so last weekend he and the rest of the board of the Alaska Trollers Association voted unanimously to endorse H. R. 1097, the Salmon Planning Act. It would authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to remove dams if and when that is deemed necessary to comply with treaties and the Endangered Species Act.

The trollers wrote to President Bush Dec. 13 insisting that spilling water and salmon past the dams is crucial to the survival of 2,600 Southeast trollers, not to mention gillnetters and seiners.

And, more to the point, the letter places blame where blame belongs. The dams are what put these fish on the brink. With data that Alaska Fish and Game biologists say was accurate at last study, the trollers lay it out: 95 percent of endangered Snake River fall chinook mortality happens at the dams. The other 5 percent happens at sea, and only 5 percent of that ends up in Alaska's creel.

It isn't Alaskans alone who fear the consequences of an end to dam spilling. When the trollers met last weekend in Juneau, five representatives of the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission came north to share their knowledge of numerous threats to wild fisheries, including a slackening of environmental controls at the dams.

Any Columbia basin fish caught in Alaska is potentially one that the tribes could have caught upriver. But Mike Matylewich, fisheries manager for the intertribal commission, says he came to Alaska to share information with people who are on his side. They may quibble about who gets how much of the harvest, but ultimately the point is to get fish to sea in the first place.

"We have a common interest in salmon recovery," he says.

Without that recovery, Alaska fishermen and towns will always face the threat of tighter harvest restrictions.

Into the mid-1990s, Alaskans were allowed roughly 263,000 chinook a year, says John Clark, chief anadromous fisheries scientist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Since then a treaty with Canada and court tests have led to a system that allows Alaska a certain number based on each year's apparent abundance.

That quota has fallen as low as 155,000 in 1996, but rebounded nicely by 2002, allowing for 370,000 treaty fish - a bonus that many attribute partly to dam spill and other river modifications.

Most of those fish are not from the Snake or its endangered stocks, and some come from healthy runs that still ply the Columbia or Snake. In fact, the coalition Save Our Wild Salmon asserts that each Alaska fisherman is likely to catch only a single endangered Snake River chinook every 44 years.

Forty-four years. So, unless fish-friendly improvements to the river hydropower system are maintained or strengthened, next time you catch one you may be looking at the last.

In that case I suggest you get some butter and tarragon. Somebody should savor the futility.

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FISH KILL OR SPILL?

Beware of sunny March madness

Someone must have done a rain dance. Whoever that was, thanks. But who can complain about the recent sunny weather you ask?

Fish.

That's because a lack of rain often means an abundance of worry about whether the Columbia River will be able to serve both its man-made function of supplying electricity and its God-made function of supplying water for fish and wildlife dependent on the river.

As The Columbian's Erik Robinson reported earlier this week, when the skies were still reliably blue, only half an inch of rain had fallen in the month of March. Compare that to March 2003's 5.75 inches of rain fall or an average March at 3.37 inches of rain. Wednesday and Thursday bumped the count up nicely, but we are still far below rain levels that would make salmon do summersaults.

When humans made the river part machine and less natural, we decreased the likelihood of fish surviving an already difficult migration maze. And one of the best ways to keep fish from turning to chowder in dam turbines has been to create water-consuming spillways over the dams.

Spillways are an excellent dam mitigator and therefore should have constant support from Northwesterners who understand how special this region is because of its commitment to the environment. The Northwest's natural treasures are the envy of tourists. There is no doubt that the region's economy and quality of life are boosted by the attractive landscape.

But the trouble with spilled water is that it means less of the wet stuff gushing through the turbines, which means decreased energy generation, which means less money from sales of hydropower to other regions, which at times can translate into higher electric rates. Sometimes salmon even have to go up against overly optimistic irrigated farming efforts in the quest for diverted water.

Since money can be recouped more easily than endangered fish, however, we encourage power managers not to consider curtailing spill programs this summer to deal with possible water shortages. While costly, some things are nearly priceless. And continued Columbia River fish runs are definite nominees in that category.

The temptation to save money by ditching our federal and state commitments to the environment hits officials nearly every summer, however. So start praying for a lot of April showers.

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P-I OPINION

Pinching pennies won't save fish

Pinching pennies is the poorest way to protect anything. The plan to cut costs on salmon protection along the Columbia River could eventually hurt fish, the dams and the Northwest's economy.

The Bonneville Power Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said last week they want to reduce summer spills of water, which aid fish moving downstream past hyrdoelectric dams. The spill reduction will allow the BPA to sell more electricity to California, eventually benefiting Northwest electric ratepayers. For far less, the agency argued, it can "achieve similar or better" results for fish with mitigation steps, such as control of salmon predators.

Viewed narrowly, BPA's desire to be as cost-effective as possible while protecting fish makes perfect sense. If BPA can pull off the change in river operations without violating the Endangered Species Act, which very much remains to be proved, the agency might eliminate part or all of an expected 5 percent increase in wholesale costs to electrical utilities. That would help the region's electrical consumers, especially companies that have seen their longtime energy cost advantage erode or disappear.

But a wide context is helpful in thinking about the Columbia River drainage system. The federal government's 20th century dam-building binge has changed the Northwest's economy, environment and society in ways that still aren't fully comprehended.

Some of the environmental damage, though, is well documented. That's why one of the salmon runs helped by summer spills is under Endangered Species Act protection. It's also why the removal of four Snake River dams was almost ordered four years ago.

Instead, after hearing about the huge effects that dam removal would have on Eastern Washington's farms, economy and communities, federal agencies decided that review of the dams' removal could be delayed 10 years. While dam removal would provide surer help, officials decided, extraordinary efforts might save the salmon by other means, such as the spills.

Officials have seen better than expected results for salmon so far. But the spill plan attempts to ease commitments that, in the life of the river, were made almost yesterday.

Salmon are still a long way from health. This plan unwisely invites more risk. A short-term financial boost will prove a foolish bargain if broken promises of recovery require dam removal.