



Federal Caucus News

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Federal Caucus Releases Comprehensive Columbia-Snake River Salmon Plan

SEATTLE, Wash. – A team of nine federal agencies today released a long-term strategy to recover threatened and endangered fish in the Columbia Basin. It calls for significant habitat improvements in the Columbia estuary and its tributaries and changes in the hatchery system, while leaving the four lower Snake River dams in place.

“Breaching those dams remains an option if the recovery efforts don’t meet strict performance standards included in the strategy,” said Donna Darm, acting regional administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), an agency of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). “This approach challenges hydropower system operators, hatchery and fishery managers, users of habitat and virtually everyone who influences the life cycle of the fish to meet rigorous survival goals over a defined period.”

The agencies, together known as the Federal Caucus, are charged with protecting salmon and other fish in the Columbia River Basin listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Their plan targets a dozen badly depleted populations of salmon and steelhead and two other Columbia Basin fish – bull trout and Kootenai River white sturgeon.

Part of the strategy from the Federal Caucus comes from two biological opinions: one from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the other from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

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Service. The opinions govern how the basin's massive federal hydropower system can best be managed to minimize harm to salmon and steelhead as they migrate to the sea and back, while also protecting bull trout and white sturgeon, which are resident species.

The new NOAA Fisheries biological opinion differs in two important respects from its 1995 counterpart and subsequent updates. First, it sets goals to improve salmon survival in locations away from the dams to increase the number of fish moving past dams on the main stem of the river. And second, it establishes performance standards and schedules by which the federal fisheries agencies will be able to evaluate objectively whether the measures are working.

The biological opinion has built-in performance reviews at three, five and eight years to take advantage of what's learned and to require more aggressive actions in all categories if goals are not being reached.

Although breaching remains an option, the agencies have examined the scientific evidence and concluded recovery can be achieved in the current hydro system by relying heavily on habitat improvements in the estuary and tributaries and on a radical overhaul of the hatchery system.

At the heart of the recovery strategy is the Caucus's All-H Paper, known formally as the Basin-Wide Salmon Recovery Strategy. This document integrates all the requirements of the biological opinions and adds far-reaching measures outside the hydropower arena to limit salmon catches, restore salmon habitat and change how hatcheries are managed. It relies heavily on the participation of tribes, as well as state and local governments. The entire package was released in draft form last July for review by Northwest Indian tribes and by the states of Washington, Idaho Oregon and Montana. The documents released today reflect their comments.

The NOAA Fisheries biological opinion, which replaces one in force since 1995, sets minimum water flows in the Snake and Columbia rivers during crucial parts of the year, calls for more spill of water over eight hydroelectric dams and upgrades fish-passage facilities at those dams for both downstream juveniles and returning adults.

The strategy requires revenue from dam operations be used to pay for habitat, harvest and hatchery actions. However, federal funds from other sources are also used to support the program. The program is expected to cost an average of \$352 million a year.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's biological opinion proposes actions that for the first times will provide protection for bull trout and increase their survival. Bull trout were not listed at the time of the Fish and Wildlife Service's 1995 opinion, which addressed the needs of Kootenai River white sturgeon. The new opinion focuses on operational changes at upper Columbia River dams because that is mostly where hydropower operations affect these species.

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The FWS biological opinion calls for modified flood control at Libby and Hungry Horse dams to benefit Kootenai River white sturgeon, bull trout and salmon. It specifies operations at Libby Dam to encourage sturgeon spawning and provide rearing habitat. In addition, the biological opinion establishes minimum upriver flows for bull trout and calls for studies to determine the extent of bull trout use of the lower Columbia and Snake river dams in the federal hydropower system.

For further information please see the Federal Caucus Web site at www.salmonrecovery.gov

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(See next page for Background on Measures in the Plan)



Background on Measures in the Plan

The All-H Strategy includes immediate actions to jump start recovery, continued scientific research and a monitoring and evaluation program to enable assessments of progress. Here's a summary:

Habitat. Habitat efforts will cover three areas: tributary streams, the estuary and the main stem rivers. In the tributary areas, the federal government will protect and restore its own lands. On non-federal lands, federal agencies will work with state, private and tribal partners on actions with immediate benefits, such as increasing flows in streams, removing barriers to fish movement, installing fish screens on water diversions, improving water quality and restoring the land alongside streams. Action to restore the Columbia River estuary will be an important part of the overall effort.

Hatcheries. The strategy reforms federally funded hatcheries to minimize harm to wild salmon and improve survival rates of hatchery stocks. Hatcheries will act as "safety nets" to prevent extinction of weak stocks through various means, such as collecting eggs and sperm from wild fish and releasing offspring into streams to increase natural production.

Harvest. The federal agencies, working with the states and tribes, will cap harvest of protected fish at current levels and provide opportunities for selective harvests of fish that aren't protected. There may be further reductions of catches by fine-tuning fishing to reduce accidental catches of protected wild fish when they mix with hatchery stocks and by buying back fishing licenses.

Hydropower. The federal agencies will maximize salmon survival throughout the hydropower system by improving when and how water moves through the system and by upgrading the quality of the water itself. The goal will be to make it easier for young and adult fish to pass safely through the dams and reservoirs that separate spawning and juvenile rearing areas from the ocean.

Federal actions will be undertaken by the Federal Caucus, the nine agencies with salmon responsibility in the Northwest. They are the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

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