MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT LOWER SNAKE RIVER DAM REMOVAL

Myth 1: Northwest ratepayers will be devastated by the costs of replacing the power lost if the four lower Snake River dams are removed since these dams generate enough to power Seattle.

Reality: The four lower Snake River dams are relatively unreliable sources of power compared to some other dams in the federal Columbia River system. They are “run of the river” dams with very little storage capacity and are thus almost totally dependent on the amount of snowpack and rate of runoff. While they have a collective generating capacity of 3,033 megawatts, their average yearly output is around a third of that — 1,075 average megawatts (aMWs).

Together, these four dams produce only 790 aMWs of firm power (i.e., the amount of electricity utilities can count on in a drought year). And even that is misleading, since most of that potential exists in spring when the region has a power surplus. When the energy is most needed in winter and late summer, these dams are good for only 425-525 MWs. If Seattle had to rely on the lower Snake dams for its power, it would have electricity shortages much of the year.

Because of the unreliability of these four dams, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council’s 6th Energy Plan shows that the region would only need to replace about 345 MWs of additional power to address the current output of these dams. The impact on customers’ rates would be somewhere between 2-4% percent if spread throughout the region, refuting claims that dam removal would devastate ratepayers. Indeed, due to the large amount of energy efficiency in the plan, customers’ bills are actually expected to go DOWN over the next 20 years, even if the four lower Snake dams are removed.

Myth 2: Renewable energy and conservation cannot replace the lost generation or cover future load growth if the four lower Snake River dams are removed.

Reality: The 2009 Bright Future report from the NW Energy Coalition illustrates that there is enough affordable energy efficiency and renewable energy resources in the Northwest to satisfy load growth, phase out all of the region’s carbon-emitting coal plants, and replace the modest amount of power coming from the four lower Snake River dams. Furthermore, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council’s 6th Power Plan, released in 2010 underscores many of the findings in Bright Future. The Council’s plan shows that the region can meet its growing energy needs almost entirely with energy efficiency and new renewables and with no net increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

In addition to being much cheaper and cleaner than gas, reducing loads through conservation frees up valuable transmission capacity needed to integrate more renewables in the Columbia Gorge, and reduces the need for the peaking ability of the dams. Both the Bright Future and the 6th Plan show that we have a sensible and affordable path toward a Northwest energy future where regional carbon emissions are reduced enough to meet the regional climate targets and the lower Snake River is restored for the benefit of salmon, jobs, and communities.

Myth 3: The lower Snake dams are necessary to ensure that wind power can be integrated into the power grid.

Reality: Removal of the four lower Snake River dams will not significantly increase the cost to integrate or back up wind resources into the grid. Hydropower facilities can “firm” or back up wind generation by leaving water in the reservoir when the wind is blowing and generating power, and then releasing the water to generate power when the wind is not blowing. But the problem now in the region is that we actually have an excess of hydro capacity at certain times of year that creates a limitation on how much wind we can allow onto the energy grid. Removing the four lower Snake River dams would help to eliminate that problem and thus allow more wind energy to be brought onto the system.

Myth 4: Fish are doing better than ever and returns are approaching historic levels.

Reality: Contrary to repeated statements from federal agencies, most wild Snake River salmon and steelhead returns remain at about the same levels as when they were first listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the early 1990’s. The last couple of years have shown some minor improvements, especially compared to the dismal returns of...
late. But around 80% of these returns are hatchery fish, not wild ones, and it appears that 2011’s numbers will be substantially down from the previous several years and may not even meet preseason projections. And while those numbers were predicted to be near or slightly below the 10-year average, they are less than half of the numbers we saw as recently as 2001 and 2002. More importantly, the wild returns are still nowhere near NOAA recovery targets, which must be met for eight consecutive years, or the Council’s replacement or recovery targets.

Myth 5: Removal of the Snake River dams will benefit only 4 of 13 ESA-listed fish populations in the Columbia-Snake Basin and there is no science or data suggesting that dam removal would restore them anyway.

Reality: Many claim that removing the four lower Snake dams will only help four of the thirteen ESA-listed species in the Columbia-Snake Basin. In truth, while the four Snake River salmon and steelhead populations will benefit the most from the removal of the four lower Snake River dams, this action will also help improve water quality and flow in the lower Columbia River, thus benefiting all 13 listed stocks that migrate through the Columbia.

The science is clear that lower Snake River dam removal is the best hope to restore Snake River salmon back to the Basin. Among other sources, the Plan for Analyzing and Testing Hypotheses (PATH, a group of federal, state, tribal, and independent scientists convened by the Clinton Administration in the mid-1990s to examine the causes of Columbia and Snake River salmon declines and the best courses of action for reversing those declines) report from 1998 concluded that removing the lower Snake River dams had an 80 and 100% probability, respectively, of recovering Snake River spring/summer chinook and fall chinook. In addition, NOAA’s 2000 Biological Opinion concluded that dam removal was the most biologically certain way to recover Snake River salmon: “[B] reaching the four lower Snake River dams would provide more certainty of long-term survival and recovery than would other measures.” According to the American Fisheries Society, “[i]n contrast to the uncertainty of success from the removal of hydro projects in other portions of the basin, the benefits to Snake River stock survival and recovery would be assured with the removal of the lower four dams on that system...”

Myth 6: The real problem for Columbia and Snake River salmon is not the dams, but instead climate change and ever-changing ocean conditions.

Reality: By far the biggest killer of endangered wild salmon and steelhead are the dams on the lower Snake and mainstem Columbia. In fact, the current federal salmon plan permits the federal dams to kill more than 90% of some of these salmon. Yet NOAA and BPA have consistently downplayed those impacts and instead have attributed both good and bad salmon returns to ocean conditions. The best science shows us that the most effective way to ensure strong salmon returns in variable ocean cycles is to fix their freshwater habitat — and that begins with the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. While dam removal is not a silver bullet, with strong actions including dam removal, salmon populations will be better able to weather poor ocean cycles in good health and truly thrive when ocean conditions are good.

Thanks to their extensive high-elevation habitat in the mountain rivers and streams of Idaho, NE Oregon, and SE Washington, Snake River salmon and steelhead are well-positioned to survive and thrive in spite of climate change — but only if the four warm, predator-filled reservoirs on the lower Snake River are replaced with a cooler, swifter, free-flowing river.

Myth 7: Removing the lower Snake River dams will cause economic devastation and thousands of lost jobs.

Reality: Federal taxpayers and Northwest rate-payers have already spent upwards of $10 billion on salmon recovery efforts in the Columbia-Snake River Basin for fairly little in return. The federal government has indicated that the current plan will cost an additional $700 million to $1 billion per year to con-
tinue the same general activities that we have been doing for the last decade, but which are not achieving sustainable salmon populations. At the same time, the fishing industry has lost more than 25,000 jobs because of salmon declines in the Columbia-Snake Basin. We cannot afford to continue down this path and lose any more jobs.

A RAND Corp. analysis, as well as one by a coalition of taxpayer, energy, fishing, and conservation groups, found that removing the Snake River dams may be cheaper in the long run than continuing to spend resources on the failed strategies of the past. In fact, the latter study found that as much as $1.6 to $4.6 billion could be saved with the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. And RAND’s analysis found that, if done well, dam removal could actually produce as many as 15,000 new, long-term jobs. If expanded fishing business opportunities are included in the economic picture, lower Snake River dam removal could bring billions of dollars in increased economic benefits to the Northwest from expanded fishing (both sport and commercial), new river-based recreational opportunities, and non-recreational revenue.

Myth 8: Removing the lower Snake River dams will hurt farmers and irrigators.

Reality: Removal of the lower Snake River dams need not have a detrimental impact on farmers in eastern Washington. Prior to the completion of those dams in 1975, grain and other products in the region were transported to market chiefly by rail and truck. Today, a significant portion of these products moves via barge from Lewiston, Idaho, or grain-loading facilities elsewhere on the lower Snake River. Recent studies have found that the 140-mile navigation channel created by the lower Snake River dams could be affordably and effectively replaced by upgrading the Northwest’s railroad lines. Upgrading railroads in southeastern Washington and Idaho to accommodate most of the grain currently moving down the lower Snake River (some would still be barged from Columbia River ports near Pasco, Washington) would not be cheap, but it can be done cost-effectively.

Regarding irrigators in the Columbia-Snake basin, removal of the four lower Snake River dams could actually take pressure off upriver irrigators in Idaho, who under an aggressive non-dam-removal plan would need to let more water remain in the river to mitigate for the effects of the dams. And the relatively small amount of irrigated farmland along the lower Snake River (Ice Harbor Dam is the only one that provides irrigation for farms) could be replaced by extending intake pipes to a free-flowing river. Similarly, dryland wheat farmers could retain an affordable, reliable transportation system if some of the taxpayer savings from dam removal are invested in upgrading railroads, highways, and Columbia River barge facilities.

Myth 9: Lower Snake River dam removal will cause an increase in air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Reality: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers found that the removal of the four lower Snake River dams would actually decrease total air emissions by seven tons per year from the transportation sector. The same Corps analysis found that air emissions from the power sector would increase by less than 1% in the Western states. However, that Corps analysis — as did the Council’s analysis attached to the 6th Power Plan — assumed power from the Snake dams is replaced with CO2-producing alternatives. Analyses from RAND Corp. and the NW Energy Coalition have found that the power from these dams can be affordably replaced with proven carbon-free energy sources.

Myth 10: Redoing the current federal salmon plan would upset agreements built around that plan.

Reality: There is no reason that the current Memoranda of Agreement between the Bonneville Power Administration and several of the sovereigns in the Columbia River Basin could not and should not remain in place if the salmon plan is improved. Fishing and conservation groups, along with the State of Oregon and the Nez Perce Tribe have argued in court that the projects identified in those agreements should continue to be funded — no matter what additional actions or changes may be found necessary to protect and restore salmon in the Columbia and Snake River Basin. The only reason these agreements would be disturbed is if the federal government decided to abandon them. Simply ensuring that the current federal salmon plan is legally and scientifically sufficient need