In a hot climate, the lower Snake River dams do not justify their cost

The Columbia and Snake river dams and associated reservoirs continue to illegally jeopardize the survival of eight wild salmon species. For the fifth time since the year 2000, a federal district court has rejected the federal government’s plan for mitigating these effects, emphasizing that current efforts have “already costs billions of dollars, yet they are failing.” The four lower Snake River dams in southeast Washington State are key to addressing this crisis.

Bonneville Power Administration’s (BPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ operation of the lower Snake River dams wastes taxpayer and utility billpayer money and is unsustainable:

• It costs at least $250 million/year to operate the four lower Snake River dams. Some sources suggest far higher figures.

• Over the past 16 years, freight transport on the lower Snake River has declined by more than 60%. Container shipping on the lower Snake River has ceased. Wheat shipments – which account for the vast majority of tonnage shipped today – have declined by 43%. These declines in traffic combined with an increase in the costs of maintenance and operations mean that American taxpayers are now seeing a return of at most 43 cents for every dollar spent maintaining the navigation system.

• Upkeep for these aging dams will cost many hundreds of millions of dollars in the years ahead. All 24 of the four lower Snake River dams’ turbines have reached the end of their useful lives or will do so within the next dozen years. The cost to rehabilitate those turbines is currently estimated at $776 million. Navigation locks and other structures are also increasingly in need of major repairs. The Corps will spend more than $16 million in just the next year on lock repairs and a turbine replacement Lower Monumental Dam. In the past year alone, the Corps has spent $50 million on the first of a two-part fish passage upgrade at Lower Granite dam.

• Spending even more money to maintain dams that are money losers makes no sense and cannot be sustained.

The lower Snake River dams contribute little to meet the Northwest’s power needs:

• The dams typically produce less than 4% of the region’s power, most of it during the April-June snowmelt peak when the region needs it least.

• The Northwest grid today often has more energy than it can handle. In 2011 and 2012, for example, wind producers were shut off the regional grid in order to accommodate hydropower generation while BPA literally gave power away to its large industrial customers. For these and other reasons, the Northwest is well-positioned to end its use of the lower Snake River power and replace it over time with investments in available and affordable energy efficiency and new renewables.
• Numerous studies demonstrate that we can remove these dams and actually lower energy bills through a combination of investments in energy efficiency and new renewables.

**Climate change increases the cost of the dams:**

• 2015 was the hottest year on record in Washington State. Water temperatures in the Bonneville adult fish ladder today are already one degree higher than a year ago.

• Hot weather means low flow, low energy output, and fish kills. During the summer months, all four dams are operating at minimum production. That minimum is especially low in years like 2015.

• Half the Columbia sockeye run – at least 400,000 salmon – died in hot water on the Columbia and Snake rivers last summer. Some 99 percent of the endangered Idaho sockeye – all but a few dozen of more than 4,000 adult fish that entered the mouth of the river – died before they reached their spawning grounds in central Idaho. Countless juvenile salmon en route to the ocean also perished due to the hot waters last year. As a result, salmon returns will be harmed for years to come.

• Even in non-drought years, all four lower Snake River reservoirs routinely violate Clean Water Act standards for salmon bearing streams.

**Bonneville Power Administration’s salmon recovery to date – costly and ineffective:**

• According to BPA, the region’s electricity billpayers and the nation’s taxpayers have poured more than $15 billion so far into salmon restoration. Yet these efforts are failing because they are not aimed at restoring the river itself.

• In fiscal year 2015, for example, fish and wildlife costs were about $559 million, including $258 million in direct (expense) costs, $85 million for program costs, $151 million in capital repayment for hatcheries, fish passage facilities and land purchases for habitat, and $65 million for power purchases.

**The Solution is the Snake**

The Snake River is the gateway to millions of acres of the most pristine salmon spawning grounds remaining in the continental United States. Because of their high elevation and proximity to snow melt, these streams will be particularly resilient in the face of climate change. Removing the four lower Snake River dams will re-open a path from the Pacific Ocean to Idaho that salmon have not had for decades, and one they will need even more in the decades ahead with climate change.

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Sources:


*Lower Snake River Dams Navigation Study*, Rocky Mountain Econometrics, September 2015