Columbia Basin Salmon and Steelhead Approach Key Crossroad

By Joseph Bogaard
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The dams were, in fact, very controversial in their day. Similar projects that were slated for construction immediately after their completion, like Asotin Dam upstream from Lewiston, Idaho, never got off the ground. After our nation’s 200-plus year spasm of dam building, people began to say “enough.” Today, it is certain that these high-cost, low-value salmon-killing dams would never be built. The limited benefits that they do provide would be met — and still can be met — with efficient and effective alternatives. A scarcity has increased the value of salmon and fish and wildlife and free-flowing rivers, and societal priorities have changed. But these four dams are here now, and our nation faces a critical decision about whether they stay. It’s not too late to correct this costly mistake.

There is, as they say, no free lunch, and this is certainly so in the Columbia basin. People, economies and fish and wildlife have all been casualties of last century’s dam development frenzy. Despite treaties with the federal government, the nutritional, cultural, and spiritual needs of the original ‘salmon people’ – Northwest tribal people – were virtually ignored as dams severed ancient migration corridors, inundated the essential fishing grounds like Celilo Falls, and the unimaginably large salmon returns faded into the past.

And, of course, whites arriving in the Northwest established a new commercial fishery that started on shore, quickly expanded into the rivers, and eventually into the ocean along the coasts of Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho and Alaska. As recently as the 1960s and ’70s, the Pacific Coast salmon economy – with the ‘Mighty Columbia’ as its star – generated more than a billion dollars annually and supported more than...
Despite the judge's public statements of skepticism about the lawfulness of the 2008 Bush Plan, and the active encouragement by fishermen, businesses, conservationists, scientists, and some members of Congress to bury it, the Obama Administration decided to formally adopt the plan orphaned by the election. The federal agencies' much-heralded "scientific review" of this plan before the decision to adopt was anything but transparent, open, or consistent with standard science practices. The review was conducted entirely behind closed doors by federal scientists who were literally sworn to secrecy; few notes or findings from that review have ever been released to the public. "Trust us," they said.

It seems that the Northwest's big power brokers had pulled the Obama Administration into their vortex.

The scientific verdict is in. First and foremost, there is strong, long-standing scientific support for dam removal in order to protect these one-of-a-kind fish from extinction. The nation's oldest and most prestigious fisheries science organization — the American Fisheries Society — first endorsed lower Snake River dam removal in 1999 as the best and perhaps only way to protect imperiled Snake River stocks from extinction. The 2000 Clinton Plan even concluded that dam removal is "the single most beneficial action" we can take to protect these fish, but then succumbed to the politics of the past and did what it called "everything-but" instead — much of the same old stuff: barging juvenile fish past dams, bounty fishing for northern pikeminnow, gold plating dams, more.
advocates, Judge Redden has required at the request of salmon and fishing and rearing. Since 2005, for example, provides updated information on the implications of replacing the dams' impacts has only hardened.

Replacing the dams is feasible and affordable. The limited services these four dams provide — hydropower, barge transportation and irrigation can all be replaced with clean, efficient, and salmon-friendly alternatives that keep communities whole, invest in the regional economy, and create thousands of new jobs. Rather than continuing to waste nearly $1 billion annually on ineffective federal actions that will never restore healthy fish populations, we have an opportunity to transition to a life after these dams. By redirecting just a fraction of this money, we can improve our regional infrastructure by replacing the dams' benefits with alternatives, create jobs, and expand our regional economy and prosperity. Government as well as independent studies have concluded that this is both feasible and affordable.

A 2009 analysis from the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, for example, provides updated information on the implications of replacing the power currently generated by the dams. Confirming the findings in the NW Energy Coalition’s Bright Future report, the Council’s detailed analysis accompanying the plan shows that the Northwest can meet all new electricity needs over the next 20 years with clean and renewable sources of energy and remove the four lower Snake River dams with very little effect on the bills of Northwest ratepayers.

Despite more than two decades of intransigence by the federal government, there are nevertheless reasons for optimism in 2011. The merry-go-round of litigation over the last twenty years has in fact forced the government to do much more than they wanted to protect salmon and the habitat that they depend upon for migrating, spawning, and rearing. Since 2005, for example, at the request of salmon and fishing advocates, Judge Redden has required the federal government (despite their strenuous objections) to “spill” water over Snake and Columbia River dams during the spring and summer. This allows many more juvenile salmon and steelhead to safely migrate in the river to the ocean, thereby leading to increased returns by adults several years later. While spill is an important piece of the puzzle, especially in the near-term, it is not, by itself, sufficient to protect and restore the Columbia basin's imperiled salmon and steelhead.

Northwest political support for a new approach is growing slowly but steadily. Both of Idaho's Republican US Senators, Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, have indicated in recent years their support for an inclusive, all-options-on-the-table stakeholder process to resolve this issue in a manner that works both for salmon and people.

In Oregon, Democratic U.S. Senator, Jeff Merkley also believes in commencing a negotiation process to allow regional stakeholders to work together to craft a lawful, science-based plan that protects and restores endangered salmon and steelhead, creates jobs, and resolves this long-standing issue. After an eight-year hiatus, Democrat John Kitzhaber has just been re-elected Oregon’s Governor. A strong advocate of salmon and fishing communities, Governor Kitzhaber, in 2001, endorsed removal of the four lower Snake River dams as part of a larger solution to the resource conflicts in the Columbia Basin.

Working in the House of Representatives, Congressmen Jim McDermott (D-WA) and Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) have led efforts for a number of years to pass legislation that would initiate a series of studies to assess the science behind the federal government’s plan and develop needed information on the costs and benefits of removing the dams and replacing their benefits.

The most significant remaining Northwest opposition to a regional stakeholder process rests with Washington members of Congress, Democratic Senator Patty Murray and Republican Representative Doc Hastings. Salmon and fishing advocates can hope for a positive ruling from Judge Redden when he rules on the (in)adequacy of the Obama Administration federal plan in the spring. A strong, decisive ruling might be just the medicine that folks like Senator Murray and President Obama need to shift gears and bring people together to resolve this tough issue once and for all.