The Federal Agencies’ CRSO DEIS will not bring us together or lead to a comprehensive solution to our salmon, energy and community challenges

The Columbia River System Operations (CRSO) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) proposes to maintain a costly status quo for Northwest salmon and communities and greatly overstates the costs of a new approach working together to solve these inter-connected problems. It will continue to fail to protect endangered Columbia-Snake River salmon, perpetuate high costs and uncertainty for BPA, and ignore opportunities that exist for our communities.

I. Background:
On Feb. 28, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bonneville Power Administration released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that considers options for future management of the Columbia Basin’s federal dams. This analysis was ordered by the U.S. District Court in Portland in 2016 when it invalidated the agencies’ latest plan for salmon in the Columbia Basin. The 8,000-page DEIS considers five salmon/dam management alternatives, including one that would restore the lower Snake River by removing its four federal dams. The DEIS’ Preferred Alternative, however, rejects this option in favor of spilling water over eight dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers - a temporary measure that is already in place.

This DEIS follows five previous management plans that have been rejected by courts as illegal because they do not protect salmon. Stakeholders across the region are eager to avoid further litigation and wary of an EIS process that can’t deliver the comprehensive solutions that Northwest salmon and people need today.

A current 45-day comment period for public input on the DEIS will end April 13, 2020. Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, the agencies have refused to extend this minimal comment period. The federal agencies have replaced six previously scheduled public meetings with poorly attended teleconferences. A Final EIS is expected in June with adoption of a new plan by September.

II. The DEIS does not deliver the comprehensive solution that Snake River salmon and Northwest communities need and deserve.

With this DEIS, the federal agencies have failed to fully and fairly consider the type of comprehensive solution that Northwest communities need today despite having the authority under NEPA to develop and recommend solutions that exceed their existing legal authority. The DEIS focuses only on preventing extinction, when leaders and residents across the region are calling for the restoration of abundant and harvestable salmon and steelhead populations. And even the insufficient goal of preventing extinction will not be met by the DEIS’ embrace of the ‘flexible spill agreement’ that is already in place today. Independent scientific analyses demonstrate that current spill levels will not reverse the steady decline of endangered salmon and steelhead populations.
An effective solution for Northwest salmon and people must move beyond historic conflicts and proactively address four urgent, connected issues. A long-term plan must:

- Restore abundant, fishable salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia Basin
- Protect and invest in the economic vitality of local farming and fishing communities
- Continue the region’s legacy of providing reliable, affordable, clean energy, and,
- Honor our nation’s treaty commitments to Native American Tribes and cultures.

III. How the DEIS fails – some specifics:

- It pits salmon recovery against clean, affordable energy: The DEIS presents a false choice between maintaining affordable utility bills and restoring healthy salmon and steelhead. It overstates the cost of replacing power from the Snake River dams with clean energy, and suggests replacing their power with fossil fuels, a step we know is unnecessary.

- It ignores salmon and orca science: The DEIS dismisses the overwhelming scientific research that restoring the lower Snake River will provide salmon and steelhead with their best chance to recover, and it ignores the benefits of increasing those runs for critically endangered orcas and struggling fishing communities.

- It fails to protect salmon: The DEIS fails to acknowledge that its recommendation for ‘flexible spill’ at the federal dams will not deliver sufficient survival benefits for endangered salmon and steelhead, and ignores the fact that any potential benefits will be eroded by climate impacts—something river restoration can help mitigate.

- It ignores the benefits and opportunities of salmon recovery for communities: The DEIS focuses on the financial costs of salmon recovery and ignores the enormous sacrifices already made by Tribes and rural communities in terms of lost fishing opportunity, reduced jobs and incomes, impacts on Tribal cultures and diets, and other socio-economic effects. Further, the DEIS ignores the economic and community benefits of salmon recovery and the investments and jobs that river restoration activities will generate.

- It ignores avoided costs and future savings by restoring the lower Snake River: The DEIS ignores the anticipated savings of more than $1 billion by eliminating the rising capital, operations and maintenance costs for the four Snake River dams.

IV. Working together, Northwest policymakers, stakeholders, and sovereigns can craft a solution to meet the needs of salmon and people.

- The time has come to stop pitting our communities against each other. Across the region, people are calling for a new approach that bring communities together.
- We must honor our treaty commitments with Tribes whose livelihoods and cultures have been profoundly and adversely affected by the loss of Columbia-Snake River salmon.
- A number of Northwest leaders have begun to step forward to support community-based conversation and collaboration efforts to develop inclusive solutions for the lower Snake River and its salmon and the region’s communities.
- A careful investment package, including funding for dam removal, clean energy initiatives and transportation projects can help solve problems and move us all forward together.

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