



Hydropower and Fish and Wildlife Issues

Value of Hydropower in the Northwest

For decades, hydropower from the Federal Columbia River Power System has been a key economic driver for jobs in the Northwest. This efficient and renewable resource provides flexible, low-cost power without carbon emissions.

Hydro provides over 60% of the region's electrical generation capacity, and it makes up almost 90% of the generation within the Bonneville Power Administration's resource portfolio. As such, it is the primary resource used to serve electricity to the millions of customers of publicly and cooperatively owned utilities in the Northwest with preference rights to federal power.

The hydropower system in the Northwest also provides other key benefits that are part of our economy and way of life. These include provision of critical flood control, irrigation, navigation, and recreation.

Fish and Wildlife Considerations

Washington's electric cooperatives have long supported cost-effective actions to protect and enhance fish and wildlife in the Columbia River Basin.

Since 1980, BPA customers have invested almost \$16 billion in Endangered Species Act (ESA) and other statutory fish and wildlife obligations (not including other efforts that utilities fund in addition to the BPA programs). Because BPA recovers all of its costs through rates, WRECA members have contributed an enormous amount towards salmon recovery and wildlife mitigation. *About 30% of the power cost charged by BPA is attributable to fish and wildlife measures.*

These efforts are showing significant success:

- The 2016 fall chinook salmon returns at Bonneville Dam were the eighth highest observed since the dam was built in 1938;
- The 2016 summer chinook return was the fourth highest observed since 1938;
- The 2016 sockeye return was the fifth highest observed since 1938;
- Federal Columbia River dams are on track to meet performance standards of 96% average survival for spring and 93% survival for summer migrating fish;
- Fish efforts have protected or restored vast areas of estuary and tributary habitat;
- Dam improvements and "smart spill" provide improved fish passage and water quality; and,
- The program is strongly supported by most Northwest states and Tribes.

The federal Columbia River fish and wildlife program is the largest ecosystem recovery effort in the nation. Despite the breadth, cost, and accomplishments of the program, Judge Simon ruled against many aspects of the current Biological Opinion. Significantly, Judge Simon agreed to let the BiOp continue to govern FCRPS operations until early 2018. However, he ordered federal agencies to prepare a new BiOp coupled with a comprehensive National Environmental Policy Act analysis.

Washington’s electric cooperatives are concerned, however, that the costly and ill-advised concept of breaching the four Lower Snake River dams is once again on the table, and that some parties will interpret the Judge’s decision as requiring more spending rather than smarter investments at a time when BPA rates are already becoming uncompetitive.

Large Spill Increases and Dam Breaching Are Not the Answer

In light of Judge Simon’s decision, some advocates are again waging a campaign to remove the four lower Snake River dams, or make them less effective through large increases of spill of water over the dams. Their position overstates the impact these projects have on fish and underestimates the beneficial power, irrigation, shipping, and recreational opportunities provided by these projects. Other points on this topic include:

- Removal will not significantly increase fish survival through the Lower Snake River. Current juvenile fish passage survival rates are at or near 95% at all four dams.
- Removal will not significantly improve access to historic spawning areas. These four dams inundated only 10% of the historic fall chinook spawning habitat in the Snake River, and spring chinook, sockeye and steelhead were even less affected.
- These dams only affect 4 out of 13 ESA-listed salmon and steelhead stocks in the Columbia River Basin.
- Removing these dams would have a significant negative impact on our economy and environment by eliminating about 1,020 average megawatts of carbon-free energy, increasing greenhouse gasses by 4.4 million tons/yr, and reducing navigation capacity.
- These four dams are an important part of the automated generation control and flexible hydropower system that helps integrate other renewable energy and keep the electricity grid stable.

Recently, some advocates have sought an *injunction* to bar needed investments in the four lower Snake River dams. If granted this injunction could detrimentally impact upstream and downstream salmon passage, the reliability of the electric system, and the safe and efficient operation of these facilities. Court challenges could take years to resolve; in the meantime, the region would lose the benefit of making needed capital investments when they are most cost effective and needed for general maintenance.

About the Washington Rural Electric Cooperative Association –Established in 1942, WRECA provides its members with a variety of services. Its main function is to serve as a single, cohesive voice for its members. Its mission is to proactively influence the regulatory environment in the best interest of the consumer-owned electric utilities in the state of Washington. Furthermore, WRECA identifies and monitors issues potentially affecting the membership and serves as a resource center for issues concerning its membership. For more information, see www.wreca.coop.