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SALMON

3 Northwest Indian tribes cut deal, drop calls to breach dams

Yakama tribe is part of the agreement, which provides \$900 million for salmon projects

ROCKY BARKER; McClatchy Newspapers

BOISE - Three Northwest Indian tribes agreed Monday to drop their opposition to a plan to keep operating Columbia and Snake river dams for the next decade in exchange for \$900 million in funding for new hatcheries and salmon habitat rehabilitation projects.

The agreement removes some of the most effective voices against the federal hydroelectric dams and their effects on Pacific salmon.

The agreement came in response to decisions against the Bush administration made by U.S. District Judge James Redden in the long running case involving 13 stocks of salmon and steelhead protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The Bonneville Power Administration, which markets the electricity from dams in the Northwest, has led efforts to find agreement between the fed dam managers, the tribes, and the states.

"Today these parties are saying let's lay down the swords, let's spend more time working collaboratively to implement measures that help fish and less time litigating," said Steve Wright, BPA administrator in Portland. "I give Judge Redden credit for leading us down the path of collaboration."

Redden declared the latest salmon and dam plan, called a biological opinion, inadequate in 2006. The tribes had joined environmentalists, anglers, and sporting businesses in challenging the plan as they have done repeatedly since the early 1990s.

"The agreements will get our governments out of the courtroom and back on the firm ground of mutual goals and collaboration," said Fidelia Andy, chair of the Fish and Wildlife Committee of the Yakama Nation Tribal Council and chairwoman of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

The deal included the Warm Springs, Yakama and Umatilla tribes. The fourth member of the tribal fish commission, the Nez Perce of Idaho, though, were not a party to the agreement.

A new biological opinion is scheduled for release in May. Coincidentally, federal fisheries officials are expected to release a separate biological opinion on the effects of tribal, sport and commercial fishing, which was negotiated between the states of Oregon and Washington and the tribes.

The agreement leaves Oregon as the only government challenging the federal dam plan.

The Warm Springs, Yakama, and Umatilla tribes agreed to disavow prior criticism of the biological opinion, and to remain silent for 10 years on whether the government should remove four dams on the lower Snake River, as they have argued in court for more than a decade, said Bill Sedivy, executive director of Idaho Rivers United.

Environmentalists did not want to criticize their partners to signing on to the agreement. But Sedivy applauded the Nez Perce for not joining the other downstream tribes.

"Once again, the Nez Perce Tribe has made a courageous decision for wild Idaho salmon and steelhead," Sedivy said. "I hope they will continue to hold this line under what must be incredible pressure from BPA, so they can fully participate in all legal and scientific discussions about real salmon recovery."

"BPA's deal does little more than silence many good tribal biologists and policy-makers," Sedivy said. "The fact that BPA is requiring their silence says a lot about how much BPA fears the truth."

The Colville tribe, which has a reservation upstream of the Grand Coulee Dam, and has never challenged the federal plan, also was a party to the agreement.

BPA said the public can comment on the agreement until April 23.