



Current Reflections

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New poll illuminates attitudes on dams, energy and salmon

Hydropower is perceived overwhelmingly as a valuable, renewable resource on the same footing as solar or wind, according to recent opinion research commissioned by Northwest RiverPartners. Respondents also named hydro, which supplies 60 percent of the region's electricity, as the most practical source of energy for the Pacific Northwest.

Six hundred Washington, Oregon and Idaho registered voters were surveyed in late February and early March to measure attitudes toward issues related to Northwest dams, energy and salmon issues. Pollster Tim Hibbitts, of Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc., conducted the survey.

Hydro was named a renewable source of energy by 86% of the poll's respondents, placing it on a similar footing as wind and solar power, which were tied at 94%. However, respondents understood wind to be less reliable because it only generates electricity when the wind is blowing. Still, hydro is a natural partner for the region's growing wind industry, since it can fill in during times when the wind turbines are still.

"When asked which of the six sources of energy was the most practical for the Northwest to rely on the most, hydropower was the very clear favorite at 58%," Hibbitts said. "Wind power finished a distant second at 21%, nuclear was third at just 10%, followed by solar at 8%, with both natural gas fired and coal fired plants at 2% or less.

"Hydropower was the clear leader in every demographic category."

Hydropower helps keep the region's energy system reliable, especially when consumer demands for electricity are very high. For instance, the lower Snake River dams fill the gap when additional generation is needed on short notice.

When asked about ways to help salmon and steelhead in the Northwest, respondents put improving fish passage at the dams and reducing or banning commercial and sport fishing high on the list (90% and 75% respectively). Proposals for breaching or removing dams scored low at 21%.

The good news is that improvements at the dams and in hydro system operations have been made and are continuing to be made. "The hydro system is already being operated to give top priority in almost all circumstances to fish passage and survival," said Terry Flores, Northwest RiverPartners Executive Director. "The public and policymakers need to be made more aware of the improvements that have been, and will continue to be made, at the dams and in hydro operations for salmon and steelhead."

Dam operators on the Columbia and Snake rivers have engaged in multilayered efforts using a number of tools to help Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed fish pass and survive in their upstream and downstream journey through the dams, including: high efficiency turbine upgrades, transporting fish around dams, changing operations, bypass systems, spill and predator control.

“The fact is, juvenile salmon survival rates are as good as or better than they were when there were only four dams on the lower Columbia and Snake Rivers,” said Shane Scott, Northwest RiverPartners fisheries expert. “It seems counter-intuitive, but it’s the reality based on the most current scientific data available.”

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries data, juvenile fish survival past the dams has improved so much for spring/summer Chinook, that their numbers are now comparable to the 1960s, before the dams were built on the lower Snake River.

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***– Tim Hibbitts,
opinion researcher***

A significant portion of the survey gauged opinions about dam removal:

“Any way we looked at it, there is not a great deal of support for removing the lower Snake River dams,” said Hibbitts. “Close to six times as many respondents were strongly opposed to dam removal as those strongly supportive of it – and that’s after reading arguments in favor and against removing dams.”

According to the poll, when given two balanced statements regarding breaching the dams, opposition to removal

outweighed support by a 68-to-22% margin. “There has been little or no change in public opinion on this issue since the last Northwest RiverPartners poll taken in May 2005,” Flores noted, which found similar results in opposition to dam removal.

“People in the Pacific Northwest understand that it’s unwise to remove dams that create clean, renewable power, especially when our region continues to grow,” said Flores. “The public absolutely “gets it” on the issue of opposing dam removal.”

“There’s a solid foundation of opinion that the Snake River dams provide value to our region, but we need to make sure that opinion leaders truly understand what’s at stake,” said Flores. “Hydro is not only viewed as the Northwest’s most practical resource for meeting energy needs today, it is viewed by the public as key to meeting future needs.”

Position on Removing Snake River Dams

