

Deal with tribes could raise rates up to 4 percent, Bonneville says

Not all of the money will go to new fish-protection programs, the agency also says

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The historic, \$900 million deal this week between the U.S. government and Columbia River basin tribes could boost rates for federal hydroelectric power by up to 4 percent.

The money, pledged to tribes over 10 years to support salmon habitat and hatchery improvements while leaving Columbia and Snake river dams in place, will likely push rates up 2 percent to 4 percent, said Scott Simms, a spokesman for the Bonneville Power Administration.

About 60 percent of the money in the agreement -- or \$540 million -- is new and mainly the trigger for potential rate increases, the agency said. The remaining 40 percent will continue for 10 years programs already in place.

Advocates for utility customers say the deal may be too ambitious considering already-rising energy prices. Environmentalists say the deal is being oversold and doesn't do enough to save the salmon most at risk.

On Wednesday, Portland-based Save Our Wild Salmon said its preliminary estimates show that, at best, one-quarter of the money set aside in the main part of the deal will benefit salmon and steelhead listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The rest would benefit salmon runs and species important to tribes but not listed, such as lamprey and sturgeon.

"All these other projects are really laudable in their own right," said Nicole Cordan, Save Our Wild Salmon's policy and legal director. "It's just a question of whether they make enough changes to get us to recovery (of listed species). We think the answer to that is no."

The four Northwest tribes -- the Colville, Umatilla, Warm Springs and Yakama nations -- agreed to support controversial federal dam operations that environmental groups oppose in exchange for the habitat and hatchery work.

John Ogan, an attorney for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, said environmental groups are taking too narrow a view.

Money for nonlisted species has dropped during the focus on endangered and threatened runs, and the new agreement restores a balance, Ogan said. It bolsters lamprey in the Columbia River basin as well as nonlisted salmon runs on the Deschutes, John Day, Umatilla and Yakima rivers.

"We're losing ground on these other things," Ogan said, "and we're walking them right toward the (endangered) list."

Ogan also said the \$900 million deal will make a big difference even though all the money isn't new. Guaranteeing ongoing funding is "absolutely critical," he said, because it locks in funding that has been shaky.

Hatchery and habitat funds typically have to be renewed within 1 1/2 years, Ogan said. Guaranteeing them for a decade will cut administrative costs and allow the tribes to recruit more partners and secure more grants.

The arguments are unfolding amid a high-profile lawsuit by environmental groups and the state of Oregon that focuses on the threat hydropower-generating dam operations pose to listed salmon and steelhead.

U.S. District Judge James Redden still has to rule on the federal government's dam operation strategy and whether the BPA is doing enough to protect listed fish, with the parties due back in his courtroom in early May.

The tribes, who have long criticized dam operations because of the damage they do to fish, have agreed to switch sides in that lawsuit and support the federal government in exchange for the habitat and hatchery improvements.