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Feds Affirm: Salmon Protection Plan Is Working

NOAA Fisheries submits to the Court that protective measures are getting the job done for the region's iconic fish

Portland, Ore. – After more than two years of additional work and analysis to strengthen their case, NOAA Fisheries has reaffirmed that measures in the federal salmon plan are working to protect and restore salmon populations in the Columbia Basin. The plan – called the Biological Opinion (BiOp) – is without a doubt the most comprehensive and expensive plan to protect an endangered species in the nation, and likely the world. Today NOAA Fisheries, the agency in charge of salmon protection, submitted the BiOp to U.S. District Court, District of Oregon, which will decide its merits.

NOAA's conclusion is clear: The plan is benefitting listed salmon now and will continue to protect them well into the future. Highlights include:

- \$1.6 billion invested in new technologies at all eight federal dams and operational changes is helping young salmon survive at very high rates and helping adults return to their spawning grounds
- an unprecedented and massive program that has restored more than 10,000 acres of habitat in the Columbia Basin is already showing results

“More than one million Fall Chinook salmon returned to spawn last year, the highest numbers since Bonneville Dam opened in 1938,” said Terry Flores, executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. “And the plan has worked to bring sockeye back from the brink of extinction.”

An earlier version of the BiOp was sent back to the federal action agencies by U.S. District Judge James Redden in 2011, who asked for more assurance that the plans to restore habitat for 13 runs of ESA-listed salmon and steelhead would deliver anticipated benefits. So the agencies (BPA, Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation) reexamined the plan and the progress that has been made over the last decade.

Despite the salmon plan's demonstrated progress, environmental and commercial fishing groups are expected to continue to block the plan in court, as they have done for nearly two decades.

“Lawsuits are these groups’ bread and butter, and they will continue to sue – no matter what the facts say,” Flores said. “They are bent on removing the federal dams, no matter how well the salmon are doing, so it’s simply not in their interest to acknowledge the tremendous progress being made.”

In fact, the litigants continue to press for radical changes in dam operations, including a ten-year “experiment” to dramatically increase “spill” through dams that would violate state and federal water quality standards established to protect salmon and other aquatic organisms and would significantly increase energy costs for Northwest families and businesses.

“It also would remove several hundred megawatts of clean renewable hydropower that fuels our economy and protects our environment,” Flores said. “This radical spill proposal makes no sense – until you understand that their ultimate goal is to reduce the cost-effectiveness of the federal hydro system in order to make the case for dam removal.”

With the BiOp, the goal of the federal agencies is to protect the region’s iconic fish. NOAA’s submittal of the salmon plan to the court starts a legal process that could last up to a year. U.S. District Judge Michael Simon will set the litigation schedule and hear the parties’ arguments before deciding on the plan’s adequacy.

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Northwest RiverPartners is an alliance of utilities, ports, farmers, and businesses joined together in promoting clean renewable hydropower and salmon restoration policies based in sound science. nwrp.org.