Northwest RiverPartners
For salmon, our economy and quality of life

Return of Deadly Marine Heat Wave Underscores Critical Role of Carbon-Free Hydropower Energy

Rising Ocean Temperatures Are Dangerous Indicator for Marine Ecosystem & Adult Salmon Returns

Vancouver, WA, September 18, 2019 – Scientists have identified a new marine heatwave in the Pacific Ocean that could indicate the return of the Blob that wreaked havoc on marine life and weather systems from 2014 to 2017. The phenomenon has refocused the lens on extreme events precipitated by climate change which are now happening sooner than predicted, according to scientists.

Although the newly identified heatwave hasn't yet reached the same magnitude as the Blob, it raises red flags for the marine ecosystem and weather in the Northwest.

The news comes as salmon returns from the Fraser River to the Columbia and Snake rivers are far lower than forecasted this year. A December 2017 study1 published by the Northwest Fisheries Science Center demonstrated a strongly negative relationship between ocean temperatures and the health of salmon populations.

Ocean Ecosystem Indicators of Salmon Marine Survival in the Northern California Current

While the region has paid much attention to freshwater habitat, including the four lower Snake River dams, many biologists fear that improving river systems will have little benefit if climate change continues to warm ocean and river temperatures to levels that harm salmon and their prey.

"We are facing a legitimate climate crisis and we have an important opportunity to do more by understanding the critical capabilities of the hydropower system," said Kurt Miller, executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. "The Northwest is already a leader in clean, renewable energy with almost 50% of the region's electricity coming from hydropower and we need to continue to use hydropower to integrate more renewables in a completely carbon-free way."

Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, the Honorable Jonathan Wilkinson said in July, “Part of any realistic plan to protect and ultimately restore key salmon stocks must include a comprehensive and aggressive plan to reduce carbon emissions.”

Many power utilities in the Pacific Northwest are already using hydropower paired with wind and solar to balance the grid and combine renewable energy sources. For the four dams currently under scrutiny, their ability to support the addition of intermittent renewables, such as wind and solar power, will be critical to combatting the devastating effects of climate change on orcas and salmon.

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About Northwest RiverPartners

Northwest RiverPartners (NWRP) is a not-for-profit, member-driven organization. We represent not-for-profit, community-owned utilities across Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. We also proudly represent farmers, ports, and businesses across the region.

NWRP is focused on raising awareness about how the Northwest’s hydropower system betters communities and the natural environment, and we encourage science-based solutions that help hydropower and salmon coexist and thrive. http://nwriverpartners.org

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