

PRESS STATEMENT

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Response to Letter from Governor Brown on the Lower Snake River Dams

By Kurt Miller, Executive Director, Northwest RiverPartners

Northwest RiverPartners (NWRP) and its members advocate for a clean energy future that embraces the preservation of fish & wildlife and doesn't leave vulnerable communities behind.

Our organization supports the lower Snake River dams (LSRD) because of the large amount of carbon-free, affordable electricity they produce as well as the economic base these dams provide for Northwest agricultural workers.

While we appreciate the intention behind Governor Brown's letter, and we support her near-term practical suggestions for increased fish hatchery production, we are disappointed by her advocacy for breaching the LSRD as a long-term solution.

We believe that the many billions of dollars it would take to breach the dams and replace their capabilities would be much more effectively spent on cleaning up the Puget Sound, where the Southern Resident orcas spend most of their lives.

It is well documented that the Puget Sound suffers from high levels of toxicity which affect both Pacific Salmon and orcas. Salmon in the Puget Sound have been found with measurable levels of antidepressants, nicotine, herbicides, and even cocaine in their systems. Because orcas eat large amounts of salmon, these toxins become concentrated in their fat. These substances may be passed along to orca calves through their mothers' milk.

It will take massive investments and the whole region pulling together to repair the Puget Sound and its tributaries so that the area is suitable for healthy salmon and orca populations.

NEPA Process

We respect the Governor's ability to offer an opinion on the LSRD, but it is important to note that the federal National Environmental Policy Act governs the operations of the federal dams.

The NEPA process takes a holistic approach, examining fish and wildlife, socioeconomic aspects, power supply, and irrigation and barging. We are confident that this comprehensive examination will find that the best course for the Northwest is to keep the lower Snake River dams in place. The NEPA Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the LSRD is scheduled to be released to the Federal Register on 2/28/20.

Northwest Energy Shortage

As Gov. Brown has stated, it is imperative that we preserve our hydropower system to help achieve our long-term climate goals and safely add intermittent renewables, such as wind and solar power, to the grid.

However, what is conspicuously missing from the Governor's comments is the dire situation the Northwest currently faces due to the very real possibility of a regional energy shortage.



Northwest utilities are shutting down thousands of megawatts of coal generation plants to help fight climate change. Most energy forecasters are now predicting the possibility of an [energy shortage or even region-wide blackouts](#). Breaching the LSRD--which can generate enough carbon-free energy each year to power a city the size of Seattle--would greatly increase the risk to the Northwest.

Contrary to dated reports, the capabilities of these dams cannot be easily or inexpensively replaced. A recent analysis showed that the energy costs, alone, for LSRD replacement would be [close to \\$1 billion annually](#). It would also require new long-distance transmission lines to be constructed and the installation of untested amounts of utility-scale batteries.

At a time when the region is very concerned about equitable energy solutions, this kind of cost increase would be particularly punishing to vulnerable communities across the Northwest.

Salmon

We collectively share the responsibility to preserve endangered salmon and look to decarbonize our economy in responsible ways. NWRP embraces science-based efforts to that end.

Recent science has questioned the potential benefit of breaching the LSRD for salmon recovery. The NOAA Fisheries Science Center recently published a peer-reviewed study¹ that brings into serious question the benefit that increased spill levels or dam breaching would mean for Snake River salmon.

Additionally, researchers have noted a near synchronous decline in worldwide salmon populations, likely related to climate change and its effect on the oceans. Our oceans are sick with excess heat and carbon, resulting in acidification and the loss of prey critical to salmon.

Given this trend, it seems very unlikely that we can restore healthy Snake River salmon populations until our oceans return to a healthy state. This is a key reason we believe it is wrong to remove the LSRD, which can displace as much carbon as two Boardman coal plants running 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

If we truly want to save salmon, we need to protect our oceans from excessive heat and carbon. If we genuinely want our clean energy future to include everyone, we need it to be affordable. To do both, the Northwest needs the lower Snake River dams.

About Northwest RiverPartners

Northwest RiverPartners is a member-driven organization that serves not-for-profit, community-owned electric utilities in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. We also proudly represent partners that support clean energy, low-carbon transportation, and agricultural jobs.

¹ [“Associations among Fish Length, Dam Passage History, and Survival to Adulthood in Two At-Risk Species of Pacific Salmon”](#), Transactions of the American Fisheries Society