



PRESS STATEMENT

**February 4, 2021
Vancouver, WA**

Northwest RiverPartners Considers US Rep. Simpson Proposal to Overhaul the Region's Energy Infrastructure; Urges Caution and a More Circumspect Approach

Advocacy Group Advises Further Examination of Critical Issues Impacting NW Communities

US Rep. Mike Simpson (R - Idaho) has started discussions about a multi-billion-dollar proposal that could dramatically change the way electricity is provided and goods are delivered across the Pacific Northwest. The sheer magnitude of the plan and its timing, amid a federal stimulus push, has captured the region's attention. Behind the plan is Rep. Simpson's hope to put an end to the decades-long legal battle over salmon restoration and the lower Snake River dams.

The proposal, which continues to evolve, would create a \$32 billion Columbia Basin Fund with many objectives, but the primary aim is to finance the breaching of the lower Snake River dams and to replace them with alternative forms of clean energy and batteries. Because the dams enable other critical benefits, such as transportation and irrigation, the fund would also attempt to compensate the many communities, farms, and businesses that depend on the dams as a mainstay for their livelihoods.

We are encouraged that the scale of the plan's budget reflects the tremendous value that the lower Snake River dams bring to the region. That long-debated topic is effectively put to rest by the proposal's significant price tag.

Like Rep. Simpson, we also have a vision for regional collaboration that moves the Northwest beyond the courtroom and towards partnership. This collaboration is in the best interest of recovering threatened and endangered salmon populations while we work to achieve a clean and equitable energy future for all of our residents. We appreciate that the Simpson plan clearly reflects extensive input of tribal nations and hundreds of stakeholder groups.

At the same time, Northwest RiverPartners has long-opposed breaching the lower Snake River dams. We truly believe that carbon-free hydroelectricity is an important part of the solution to the salmon crisis. It is also a critical part of providing affordable, clean electricity to the region's vulnerable communities.

While we remain open-minded about the Simpson proposal, there are several key issues in the plan that need to be addressed before we can consider it a fair and equitable solution for our Northwest communities.

First, we believe the case for breaching to save salmon lacks scientific rigor. Given the Pacific Coast-wide declines in salmon survival in both dammed and undammed rivers, it is hard to make the case that breaching dams with advanced fish passage technology will reverse this disturbing trend.

In addition, a growing body of science suggests warming, acidifying oceans are the driving factor behind [worldwide declines](#) in marine fish populations, including salmon. Breaching the lower Snake River dams does nothing to address this issue.

In fact, the Simpson proposal *substantially increases* the region's CO2 output by eliminating low-carbon barging and shifting transported goods to semi-trucks and rail. This shift could result in hundreds of thousands of [additional tons of CO2](#) in our atmosphere each year.

If sustainable salmon populations don't return to the Snake River, US taxpayers will have footed the bill to the tune of tens of billions of dollars to end up with a larger carbon footprint than we have today.

We are also concerned by the speculative nature of the plan's energy replacement component. Hydropower and pumped storage dams are proven technologies that we can depend on, but long-duration utility-scale batteries and small modular nuclear reactors are still very much in the exploratory stage. We welcome the advancement of these technologies, but the region's electric customers should not be made reliant on technological breakthroughs to keep the lights on.

We also urge a more circumspect approach to the topic of litigation. The Simpson plan includes a 35-year moratorium on salmon-related lawsuits against dam operators, but with the multitude of laws and regulations governing waterways, we are worried the plan may fall short. We are particularly concerned that state jurisdiction under the Clean Water Act provides an open door for

additional legal actions. As it stands, the proposed moratorium seems ripe for a legal challenge and warrants additional safeguards.

Many families in the Northwest rely on dam-dependent employment, whether they are seasonal farm workers or riverboat operators. Any plan around dam removal must consider how we specifically support these families. As we've learned throughout the pandemic, a check from the government cannot make up for the loss of one's career. We must ensure the transition of livelihoods for those who rely on the lower Snake River dams.

We believe Rep. Simpson's plan has the best of intentions, and it deserves to be vetted among Northwest stakeholder groups. However, considering the extremely high stakes involved, we cannot afford to ignore the need for a much more thorough analysis of what the plan can actually deliver and the deep impact it may have on our diverse Northwest communities.

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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, Wyoming, and Nevada. We also proudly represent farmers, ports, and businesses across the region that support clean energy and low-carbon transportation.

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://nwrivernpartners.org>