

# Bill asks for new studies of salmon

## Measure doesn't call for dam breaching but calls for look at economics of removal

WASHINGTON — Environmentalists targeting the removal of the four lower Snake River dams rallied behind a bill in Congress Tuesday that calls for a comprehensive new study of efforts to save Idaho's endangered wild salmon.

Buoyed by a new Democratic majority, a broad-based coalition of conservation and fishing groups say the measure could be the best shot yet at overturning federal policies that have severely depleted the river's salmon.

But unlike previous salmon recovery legislation that languished in the last Congress, the new bill introduced by Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., does not explicitly call for the breaching of the four dams.

Instead, backers are calling for a new round of economic and scientific studies that could help make the case for Congress to take that action separately.

The renewed debate in Congress comes as a federal judge in Portland, Ore., awaits a new federal plan to save the salmon of the Snake and Columbia rivers from extinction. McDermott unveiled his bill saying that some wild salmon stocks could be extinct in as few as 15 years: "I'm willing to listen, but I'm not willing to wait, because I'm not willing to practice the politics of extinction."

Salmon bring in millions of dollars in sport and commercial fishing and provide spiritual sustenance for the region's Indian tribes. But the four dams produce up to 5 percent of the region's electric power and allow barge shipping between Lewiston and Portland.

Past proposals to breach the dams have met stiff resistance from business groups and other interests.

Idaho's all-Republican congressional delegation largely opposes removing the dams, with Rep. Mike Simpson saying it should be "the last option" for saving the salmon.

Simpson and freshman Idaho Rep. Bill Sali already have joined efforts to head off McDermott's study plan, calling it a waste of taxpayer money.

Sali also plans to introduce a "sense of Congress" resolution saying that removing the dams would be dangerous.

On an issue where the fault lines are as often geographic as political, McDermott boasts some GOP support in Congress.

***The issue also has split some Democrats. For example, Democratic Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray of Washington have supported the dams as a source of renewable energy. Both have called for salmon plans that don't call for breaching.***

In crafting the legislation, McDermott and his backers are seeking to avoid the wedge issue of dam removal. Instead, the bill directs the National Academy of Sciences with an independent study of salmon recovery efforts, while the Government Accountability Office would look at the "economic effects of dam removal."

It provides no specific authority to the Army Corps of Engineers to breach the dams.

The bill has picked up more than 30 co-sponsors, including Republicans Tom Petri of Wisconsin and Christopher Shays of Connecticut. Petri and Shays joined McDermott in a letter to congressional colleagues earlier this month saying that the studies should look at "all options" to restore the wild salmon runs on the Snake River.

But the letter, also signed by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., cites full or partial removal of the four lower Snake River dams as "the one action identified by scientists as having the greatest certainty of success."

The debate stretches back more than a decade, and opponents of the bill say there has been no shortage of studies on both sides of the issue.

A group of environmental and fishing organizations released a report in November suggesting that breaching the dams could generate \$4.2 billion to \$24.4 billion in new tourism and other economic activity over the next 20 years.

But critics contend that the environmentalists underestimate the cost of replacing the dams' electrical power. The dams' average of 1,022 megawatts of electrical generation could cost \$400 million to \$550 million annually to replace, according to Scott Simms of the Bonneville Power Administration, the federal agency that markets the power from the dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers.

Opponents of dam removal say dam breaching is unwarranted by current scientific knowledge.

Simpson and Sali signed on to a recent letter to Republican colleagues describing McDermott's study plan as part of a "radical environmental agenda."

The letter, authored by Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., argues that the salmon's decline could be explained by a host of environmental factors, including fishing fleets, sea lions, coastal development and pollution. It calls the dams an "easy scapegoat for fish problems."

Opponents also contend that the Clinton and Bush administrations studied and rejected earlier dam-removal proposals.

But conservation groups like Save Our Salmon and Idaho Rivers United say new data is needed to save a fish species that is endangered despite more than \$6 billion in spending on recovery efforts during the past 25 years.

"Hard-working families affected by the disastrous salmon runs of recent years deserve the best scientific and economic information on salmon restoration available," said Bill Sedivy, executive director of Idaho Rivers United. "This bill would provide the kind of up-to-date information needed to build real solutions to our very real salmon problem."