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Breaching Snake River dams is action of last resort

The latest proposal by the federal government to spur salmon recovery should be given a chance to work.

By the Union-Bulletin Editorial Board

It is not a certainty that breaching the four dams on the lower Snake River would guarantee the long-term survival of salmon.

Yet, a few people are convinced that dam breaching is the cure-all for the salmon problem and they have mounted a steady, relentless campaign to bring the dams down. In their minds, breaching the dams is the answer.

And this obsession with dam breaching causes them to reject any and all federal proposals for salmon restoration that don't include taking down dams.

Unfortunately, U.S. District Judge James Redden seems to be among them. Redden ruled in 2004 that the Bush administration's plan for making the hydroelectric generation system on the Snake and Columbia rivers safe for salmon violated the Endangered Species Act. Redden takes exception to the plan because it considered dams as part of the landscape and makes only changes in how the dams were operated. Last month the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Redden's ruling.

And that spawned a new federal plan for salmon recovery.

That plan was quickly blasted by salmon advocates and Indian tribes for not considering breaching or major changes to the dams.

Come on!

Breaching the dams would significantly reduce power production, force a significant change to irrigation systems and prohibit barge transportation to Idaho. It would put a lot of the region under water. And it would take an economic toll on the Pacific Northwest

Dam breaching would not necessarily ensure the survival of salmon. This is why it is prudent to consider other actions to enhance the salmon population.

Any plan to restore salmon is simply a guess. They all involve trial and error, which means it is wise to consider the impact the plans will have on society, not just salmon.

This is what is being done.

Breaching the dams must be an action of last resort.

In 2001 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a study on breaching the Snake River dams. It concluded that breaching the dams would increase the chances of salmon restoration only slightly - if at all - while certainly hurting the Northwest's economy.

The plan being put forward to restore salmon might work, it might not. But it should be given a chance. It's a far more reasonable approach than demanding the dams be taken down.