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Breaching Dams Would Do More Harm Than Good

By Patricia Barclay, The Idaho Statesman, Boise

May 26--The ultimate elitist campaign, an effort by chefs to lobby for tearing out the lower Snake River dams, has hit. Somehow, they think this will let them continue to serve wild Alaska salmon, mostly in San Francisco and Seattle. I hope these chefs know how to cook better than they know geography or the facts about the fish they want to serve.

Wild Alaska salmon are not endangered and they don't pass Snake River dams. They return to upriver spawning grounds in Alaska. Only four endangered salmon runs pass these dams out of 26 threatened and endangered runs.

While the stunt got press, it didn't contribute to solutions. Perhaps these chefs should have been given some facts to go along with their recipes.

By 1883, there were more than 50 canneries on the Columbia and 42 million pounds of salmon were harvested. By the beginning of the 20th Century, fishermen were harvesting 80-88 percent of the runs. An estimated 12 to 15 million salmon in 1850 became just 348,000 counted at Bonneville in 1938. Overfishing had killed off the "mother herd."

If those dams were the only -- or even the biggest -- problem, we would not have any wild or hatchery fish here after 30 years. Instead, a change in ocean conditions starting in 1999 brought some record runs since 2000.

The dam bashers are promoting a study on removing the dams. That's already been done. The Corps of Engineers spent seven years and more than \$20 million studying the issue and producing an environmental impact statement in 2002. It concluded that breaching would not recover the runs. Today such a study would cost more than \$27 million. That's money that could be put to effective fish restoration on the ground.

The chefs should also consider:

--It would take more than 10 years and \$1 billion to breach these dams, with a net annual cost of \$267 million. You'd have to sell a lot of Alaska salmon dinners to pay that bill.

--We would need to replace the power from those dams immediately. They are an integral part of the system and are vital for use as peaking power. The most likely replacement would be thermal generation, contributing to global warming. Want to replace hydro with wind? Hydropower is crucial to shaping the erratic megawatts produced by wind turbines.

--More than 150 million cubic yards of silt impounded by those dams would be washed downstream. An additional 3 to 4 million cubic yards annually would be washed into the Columbia. That would be deadly to the runs that the chefs want to save -- in addition to killing off resident fish species.

--We would lose an efficient transportation system and have to replace it with trucks or trains pumping out more carbon dioxide. The cost to rebuild the transportation infrastructure in the state of Washington alone would be \$947 million to \$1.6 billion today, according to a study by Lund Consulting and HDR Engineering in 1999.

Some 200 chefs might not be interested in the costs of their proposal. The rest of us should be. We will be paying the bill in higher power rates, more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and higher taxes to restructure our transportation.

Wild Alaska salmon may bring premium prices to these big city restaurants but they are not endangered. While this may be a cute way to get attention on behalf of the anti-dam activists, it is a silly campaign that seriously skirts the facts. Next they will probably lobby for the right to serve bald eagles for Thanksgiving dinner.

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