

Feds reel out third salmon plan

Northwest - U.S. officials hope their latest proposal to protect fish, yet keep dams, pleases a skeptical judge

Friday, September 07, 2007

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The federal government took its last, best shot Thursday at convincing a tough Portland judge that it can keep churning hydroelectric power out of Columbia River dams while also undoing the damage the dams wreak on salmon.

The judge, U.S. District Judge James Redden, threw out the last two federal blueprints for operating the dams because they did not fulfill federal obligations to protect salmon. He has said he will not tolerate another faulty proposal and warned the government of "very serious" consequences if it gives him one.

He already voiced skepticism of the government's newest attempt, released in draft form in May and in final form Thursday.

"The federal agencies can and have to do better than this," said Charles Hudson of the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission, which represents the Warm Springs, Yakama, Umatilla and Nez Perce tribes. "Our first reaction is that it's filled with denial, contradictions and half-truths."

He said, for instance, that the new blueprint proposes making up for declining sockeye salmon by producing more fish in hatcheries, but without altering dam operations contributing to the declines. He said salmon are suffering as the government spends increasing time and resources on ineffective proposals.

On the other hand, Northwest River Partners, an organization of farmers, electric utilities and others, praised the government's more thorough analysis of what each salmon species needs to recover. But the group said federal agencies need to better address the impacts of fish hatcheries and fishing on troubled species.

Raising salmon in hatcheries and releasing them for fishermen to catch conflicts with hopes for salmon recovery, because fishermen also catch the wild salmon species that are in trouble, said Terry Flores, the group's executive director.

Some groups were looking for more aggressive changes in the way dams are operated, such as drawing down reservoir levels in spring and early summer so fish do not have to migrate through deep pools on their way to the ocean. But they did not find them.

"Show me where the major changes are, because I don't think they can point to them," said Nicole Cordan of Save Our Wild Salmon in Portland. "It's a beautiful wrapping job, but there's nothing inside."

Lingering in the background is a provision that Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho added to a federal budget bill telling federal agencies to carry out their earlier plan for dams on the Snake River that Redden ruled illegal. Conservation groups fear the provision may reflect an attempt by Congress to overrule Redden.

With Craig intending to resign, they hope other lawmakers may remove it.

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