

Gov.-elect Otter and federal officials challenge the report's findings

By Rocky Barker

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Breaching four Washington Snake River dams to save Idaho's endangered salmon would cost less than leaving the dams in place, according to a report released Wednesday by salmon advocates, taxpayer and business groups.

Dam breaching — removing the earthen section of the four lower Snake dams — would cost the region more than \$6 billion over 10 years, the report said. But restoring the river flows to aid salmon migration would save taxpayers and electricity consumers nearly \$5 billion, the groups said.

"We can save money, restore salmon by removing the lower Snake dams and keep people and communities who might be adversely affected by the dams whole," said Bill Sedivy, executive director for Idaho Rivers United.

Federal fisheries and power marketing officials and U.S. Rep. Butch Otter, Idaho's governor-elect, challenge the conclusions of the report, which largely echo the results of earlier analyses funded by salmon advocates.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' official report released in 2000 estimated the loss to the regional economy over 100 years at \$300 million annually, or about \$6 billion over 20 years.

"To say I'm highly skeptical of these conclusions would be putting mildly," said Otter. "It's important to remember that this study comes from the same folks who think our loggers, miners and mill workers, and the Idaho communities they built, are better off with tourism jobs."

Since the economy of the four-state region is \$400 billion, according to the Federal Reserve, even the worst estimates either way put the economic impact of breaching at less than 0.1 percent.

The report comes as federal agencies rewrite a plan for salmon and dam operations; a federal judge had struck down two previous plans since 2000.

The 2000 biological opinion had included breaching the four dams as a last resort, but the Bush administration has ruled that option out. Salmon advocates are supporting a bill in Congress that would authorize a new federal study similar to the one they released Wednesday.

The four dams — Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite, were built on the Snake River between Lewiston and Pasco, Wash., in the 1960s and 1970s. They produce enough electricity to power a city the size of Seattle — about 5 percent of the region's power. They also allow barge shipping of grain and other goods from Lewiston to Portland.

The salmon are an icon of the wild character of the Pacific Northwest. They are integral to the fishing and tourism industry and provide spiritual sustenance to the region's Indian tribes.

Previously, Snake River salmon runs accounted for 50 percent of all of the salmon in the Columbia River because of the pristine habitat in central Idaho's wilderness and roadless areas.

Salmon numbers declined dramatically after the final dam was built in the 1970s, and four stocks of salmon and steelhead are in danger of extinction in Idaho, Oregon and Washington rivers upstream.

The report suggests that wind generating plants and conservation efforts can replace the power that would be lost if dams are removed. But officials of the Bonneville Power Administration, which markets electricity from the four dams and 25 others in the Pacific Northwest, say the dams can be called on to produce power on a moment's notice. That is crucial to preventing blackouts and providing a stable regional power system, said Mike Hansen, a BPA spokesman.

"Given that fact, you can't replace the power with renewables and conservation alone," Hansen said.

The groups that sponsored the report included Taxpayers for Common Sense, Republicans for Environmental Protection, the Northwest Fishing Industry Association and the Northwest Energy Coalition.

The report's conclusion of increased economic benefits rides on the belief that salmon numbers will skyrocket once the four dams are removed, providing a boon for fishing and outdoor recreation industries in the West.

It estimates a nearly five-fold increase in commercial fishing, sport fishing and recreational opportunities in the Columbia Basin and five Pacific states — California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska.

Revenues from the salmon-based industries could reach \$20 billion during the next two decades, including hundreds of millions in rural Idaho, the report said.

"The good returns of 2001 helped triple my yearly income in two months," said Rexann Zimmerman, owner of a local tackle shop in Riggins. "A dependable, restored fishery will bring more tourists and millions of dollars to Riggins every year."

Idaho's Republican congressional delegation, Sens. Mike Crapo and Larry Craig and Rep. Mike Simpson, expressed opposition to breaching as they have in the past.

"Breaching the four lower Snake dams is not an option that should be on the table or even considered until we have a better understanding of the many variables affecting salmon populations," said Simpson.

Robert Lohn, Northwest director of the National Marine Fisheries Service, which is in charge of recovering 12 stocks of endangered salmon and steelhead across the region, said the report was unclear how much less the region would have to spend to restore salmon even if the four dams are removed.

The other eight endangered stocks outside of the Snake Basin are not affected by the four dams.

"I remain puzzled and perplexed about the economics they are citing," Lohn said.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Rocky Barker at rbarker@idahostatesman.com or 377-6484. Idaho Statesman file photo

Fishery biologist Jerry Harmon carries a chinook salmon to the fish ladder that leads to the Snake River at the adult fish trap on the Lower Granite Dam near Pomeroy, Wash. Officials with the National Marine Fisheries Service sample salmon to learn about health and ages of the fish. Photo Courtesy of Lower Granite Dam

Water flows from the spillway on the Lower Granite Dam into the Snake River in this photo from September. Army Corps of Engineers officials say the fish slide provides an easier route for salmon trying to get through the dam on their way to the Pacific ocean.