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Hastings blasts John Day drawdown

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Oregon's revival of an old proposal to draw down the John Day Reservoir has prompted U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings to fire off a letter criticizing the idea to several federal agencies.

In the March 27 letter to the Bonneville Power Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Army Corps of Engineers, Hastings, R-Wash., urged them to oppose lowering the reservoir to a minimum operating pool elevation of 257 feet above sea level.

The normal operating level is 10 feet higher than that.

Science didn't justify the costs of the proposal when the Corps last studied it in 2000, Hastings wrote, and it doesn't justify them today.

"If the federal agencies and litigants involved in these discussions have scientific justification for taking such a proposal seriously, I strongly urge all involved to come forward with the studies and analysis that support this concept," he wrote.

"With the future operation of one of our region's most important environmental and economic assets at stake, the Congress and the public have a right to know about the science contributing to these significant federal decisions," he added.

The drawdown idea emerged in the early 1990s and was revived earlier this month by the Oregon governor's office during closed-door conversations with tribal leaders and federal fish and dam managers discussing how to respond to U.S. District Judge James Redden's order for a new plan to operate Snake and Columbia river dams. The rationale remains the same as it was seven years ago: Lowering the 76-mile pool apparently would speed passage of juvenile anadromous fish from McNary to John Day dams by 12 to 36 hours.

The new part of equation is the supposition that the drawdown could meet Redden's requirements without breaching the lower Snake River dams.

Amy Echols, spokeswoman for the Corps in Portland, said her agency had no immediate reaction to Hastings' letter but it is trying to determine whether conditions at John Day have changed enough since 2000 to reconsider the proposal.

"What they're thinking is, 'Should we study it again?' " she said.

Ed Bowles, ODFW's Fish Division administrator, said the drawdown option is viable for saving juvenile fish because ecological changes over the years have slowed the melting snowpack that historically helped juveniles reach the estuary in three days or less, where they change from freshwater to saltwater fish.

By lowering the reservoir, the rate of flow in the Columbia River can be accelerated to help fish speed up their trek.

"These fish don't need to linger in the rivers any longer than they already do," Bowles said. "They're already delayed enough."

Still, Bowles said, lowering the reservoir would be considered viable only if irrigation and commercial shipping were "kept whole."

"That also means the infrastructure would have to be in place before it is implemented," Bowles said.

Hastings wrote that he was concerned the proposal would dry up tens of thousands of acres of productive farmland. Without extending about 20 irrigation pumps, lowering the reservoir would leave about 200,000 acres without irrigation water. He also believes the drawdown could add an estimated \$10 million yearly to the region's power costs.

John Day produces about the same amount of power as the four lower Snake River dams combined and is one of the largest power producers in the Columbia Basin.

Seven years ago, before the Corps recommended to Congress that improvements to fish passages should be considered elsewhere, studies found the loss of power caused by lowering the reservoir would be about \$587 million annually.

"Compared to the clear and exorbitant costs of the John Day drawdown proposal, the alleged benefits to salmon are uncertain at best," Hastings wrote. "There remains no scientific evidence to support a link between travel time through the hydrosystem and salmon survival."

While lowering the water could have positive impacts on some fish, the drawdown also would create its own environmental impacts. The Corps said in 2000 that lowering the reservoir would pose a significant risk to habitat used by healthy upriver chinook salmon.

According to Hastings, a drawdown would require significant and costly modifications to fish ladders at John Day and McNary dams and would destroy an existing wetland that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to replace and duplicate elsewhere.

For ODFW and the Oregon governor's office, the alternative may be to continue litigation over the removal of the Lower Snake River dams for decades to come.

"This is only one of the numerous things being considered," Bowles said. "But we do believe the status quo right now is probably not the best idea for moving forward."