

Editorial: Salmon backers' victory a hollow one

Salmon advocates won in a Portland, Ore., federal court last week.

But Idaho's wild salmon won't be saved in a courtroom. They will be saved with serious, hard work at a bargaining table. And if the environmentalists' triumph comes at the cost of consensus, it will be a hollow victory indeed.

The salmon advocates' lawsuit has focused undue attention on Idaho water. Now their victory pits environmentalists against water users and politicians, when Idahoans need to seek common ground to save salmon, a symbol of wild Idaho and an integral part of our river ecosystem.

U.S. District Judge James Redden — the judge sitting at the center of the legal fight over endangered salmon — ruled Tuesday on a complex, crucial issue. Environmentalists argued that federal agencies had failed to look fully at all river issues affecting salmon. The feds have written one document studying the Columbia and lower Snake rivers, another examining the upper Snake River above Hells Canyon Dam.

Environmentalists call this a shell game, and they have a point. The feds have carved the river system, roughly speaking, into two fiefdoms involving two agencies with different missions. The Bonneville Power Administration runs the Columbia and lower Snake dams, such as Lower Granite Dam near Lewiston downriver to Bonneville Dam, largely for hydroelectric production. The Bureau of Reclamation operates upper Snake River dams and reservoirs, primarily for flood control and water storage. When the river system is looked at in segments, environmentalists argue, agencies can point fingers about the salmon's demise. Redden last week blamed all the agencies involved, saying they "have failed to demonstrate a willingness to put the needs of salmon first, or to commit the resources necessary to implement mitigation measures." He stopped short of demanding a single document, but ordered a comprehensive look at the river system. Redden asserted, logically enough, that upriver reservoirs and dams "clearly affect downstream operations."

Yes, environmentalists have a legitimate beef, and yes, it seems like Redden is reading the issue properly. The problem is, salmon recovery isn't merely a scientific or legal challenge. It's a political challenge. Any threat to Idaho water is politically explosive.

So the Idaho congressional delegation's pointed reaction to the ruling was no surprise: "Let there be no mistake: We will protect Idaho's water." What does that mean? Larry Craig — Idaho's senior senator and no fan of Redden — isn't ruling out attaching language to a bill, saying Congress deems the feds' analysis adequate. Nothing has been drafted yet, Craig spokesman Dan Whiting said Friday.

Despite our misgivings about the lawsuit, Redden should now do his job without congressional interference. We'd like to see what he thinks should happen next. Two sentences from his 35-page ruling give us hope. "Rebuilding salmon to healthy, harvestable levels will come in large part from addressing the impacts of the downriver dam operations that do the most harm to salmon," he wrote. "Even so, the water of the upper Snake water projects and its uses must be an integral part of the analysis."

Redden appears to be listening to the scientists, the experts who say that removing portions of four lower Snake River dams may be the only way to save Idaho salmon, by allowing more young fish to migrate to the ocean. Redden's comments buttress the claims of salmon advocates, who believe a review will conclude that breaching holds the key to salmon recovery. "(The ruling) moved the comprehensive solution one step closer," said Bill Sedivy, executive director of Idaho Rivers United, one of the plaintiffs.

In other words, the salmon advocates say, trust Redden. We can't blame irrigators for being uneasy about trusting their water and their livelihoods to a judge. And let's remember the long-term goal: saving salmon from the brink of extinction, by negotiating a workable, regional salmon plan. Negotiation is urgently needed, but it requires trust — among water users, politicians, utilities, tribes and salmon advocates.

We have sided with the salmon advocates since 1997. We too believe breaching is the best way to bring salmon back to Idaho's wild rivers and draw anglers to Idaho fishing communities.

We've also said breaching protects irrigators from attempts to divert more Idaho water for salmon migration. The environmentalists' victory pushes breaching while exposing Idaho water users to uncertainty. This is a "victory" we can't celebrate.