

## Jim Kempton: Breaching is not the step forward that the Statesman suggests

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In an editorial published Sunday, July 22, the Idaho Statesman headlined the position that its decade-long case for breaching the four lower Snake River dams is stronger than ever.

A conclusion as important as this should be based on better evidence than that presented to Idaho Statesman readers.

Adult chinook survival through the four lower Snake River dams is much better today than a decade or more ago. Using PIT-tag technology and adult detection rates since 2002, NOAA Fisheries estimates that the per-dam survival rate for Snake River spring and summer chinook hatchery fish is approximately 99 percent. The survival rate for Snake River steelhead hatchery fish is over 98 percent. Fall chinook survival estimates are still being evaluated. Adult per-dam survival rates for wild fish are slightly higher. Estimated rates of in-river fish harvest and "straying" of fish have been excluded so that only dam passage impacts are represented in the survival percentages provided.

Like Snake River chinook, downward trends in returning adult salmon numbers are noted in Washington and Oregon coastal rivers and British Columbia rivers where no dams are located. Major factors affecting the return of Columbia-Snake chinook that were not addressed by the Idaho Statesman include ocean life-cycle survival, including human and predatory harvest.

Chinook salmon returning to fresh water after only one year in the ocean ("jacks") are used by fish managers as one of several estimating tools to predict the following year's run. If the jacks returning to Lower Granite dam this year are any indication, the Snake River spring chinook run in 2008 may exceed 250 percent of the previous 10-year average.

On the yearling Snake River chinook outmigration side, NOAA Fisheries in-river survival estimates for juvenile spring and summer chinook indicate higher chinook survival in eight of the last 10 years than in 1964 when only four dams existed on the mainstem Columbia and Snake rivers between Idaho and the Pacific Ocean.

The Idaho Statesman states that rather than talking about breaching, federal agencies "pushed a plan to count wild salmon and hatchery fish interchangeably in measuring salmon recovery." It is worth noting that the court-influenced NOAA Fisheries listing policy does not count wild and hatchery fish interchangeably. Planning remains focused on recovery of fish in the wild. The real question is simply whether, or in what situations, hatchery supplementation programs may be of some benefit to recovery.

In suggesting that lower Snake River dams are indiscriminately chewing up fish and swallowing up tax dollars, the Idaho Statesman overdramatizes the hazard of juvenile fish passage through the lower Snake River dam complex. Most juvenile fish are guided away from turbines to avoid indiscriminately subjecting them to the hazards of turbine passage. The Idaho Statesman knows this, some readers may not.

In the same light of disclosure, Bonneville Power Administration ratepayers are responsible for debt payments arising from construction of the hydrosystem, for hydrosystem operations costs, and for mitigation costs for fish and wildlife impacts caused by the hydrosystem. These are not tax dollars.

Finally, the Idaho Statesman cites two economic benefit studies as part of its continued support for breaching the four lower Snake River dams. The Northwest Power and Conservation Council's Independent Economic Analysis Board has previously reviewed both studies and discredited both studies.

In concluding, these comments are not intended to suggest that dams do not have adverse impacts on fish. On the other hand, breaching the four Snake River dams is certainly not an obvious step forward, as the Idaho Statesman suggests.

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