

Opinions

Salmon plan's critics locked on single issue

September 17, 2007

Critics of the latest salmon recovery plan instantly dismissed it as more of the same.

"This is the same plan with a new ribbon on it," Nicole Cordan of Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition told The Associated Press.

"The only thing they are committing to is something they are already doing and that isn't working," said Glen Spain of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

The problem, of course, is that the proposal doesn't call for breaching dams, and anything less is anathema to these true believers.

Their knee-jerk position, however, is scientifically suspect and politically futile.

The four Lower Snake River dams produce 1,022 megawatts of energy annually, enough to power the city of Seattle.

The Bonneville Power Administration estimates it would cost \$400 million to \$550 million yearly to replace that power.

Other benefits include irrigation, recreation and transportation. River users comprise a big constituency. Overcoming political opposition to dam breaching would be difficult under any circumstances.

Such hurdles might be cleared if removing the dams meant saving endangered salmon runs. That result is far from certain, however. It's wishful thinking at best.

On the other hand, efforts to improve fish passage in the Columbia Basin are reaping proven results. It's possible to build on success without sacrificing a much-needed source of clean, cheap energy and other benefits.

The latest strategy for salmon recovery that critics dismiss offhand is the result of nearly two years of negotiations and study.

The strategy is now in the hands of the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service, which is conducting its own analysis. The agency is due to issue a draft biological opinion on the plan by Oct. 31.

All this work is in answer to a lawsuit against the previous biological opinion -- or BiOp in Endangered Species Act jargon.

In October 2005, U.S. District Court Judge James Redden identified several problems with the document. One of the biggest was that the government was counting on recovery efforts it couldn't guarantee.

No one knows whether Redden will be satisfied that the next BiOp addresses all the concerns he outlined in 2005.

But the recovery strategy that NOAA is reviewing right now is a sincere and exhaustive attempt to appease the judge.

At Redden's direction, the federal agencies with a stake in river operations worked with Columbia Basin tribes and the basin's four states -- Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana -- to develop the new proposal.

The strategy would put real money -- around \$1 billion -- into actions that good science indicates will have positive results -- dam modifications, predator management, habitat rehabilitation and hatchery improvements.

Those are good ingredients for a real solution -- a broad-based collaboration of stakeholders, good science and money to carry out the plan.

But for some, any proposal that doesn't include dam removal is dead on arrival.

Litigation sparked by that mindset is likely to carry a lot of lawyers into retirement.

But can the fish outlast the stalemate?