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Oregon offers to lower reservoir instead of breaching Snake River dams

Rocky Barker - Idaho Statesman

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Oregon has proposed lowering the John Day Dam Reservoir on the Columbia River as part of an aggressive alternative to breaching four dams on the Snake River.

Drawing down the reservoir to its minimum operating pool would still allow power production and limited barge shipping. But it would cut off irrigation to 230,000 acres of land unless intake pipes are lengthened.

"We're only considering the option under the assumption both irrigation and commodity shipping can be kept whole," said Ed Bowles, Oregon Department Fish & Wildlife Fish division administrator.

Lowering the reservoir — the longest and deadliest to salmon on both the Columbia and Snake rivers between Idaho and the Pacific — would speed up migration through the 77-mile stretch, biologists say. Drawdown's benefit to the fisheries is far less than breaching the four dams on the lower Snake River in Washington, past U.S. Corps of Engineers studies have shown.

But it could be a critical part of an aggressive non-breach strategy to needed to meet U.S. District Judge James Redden's order for a new plan for operating federal dams on the Snake and Columbia River.

The proposal came in closed-door discussions between federal fisheries and dam managers, states and American Indian tribes seeking to collaboratively develop a plan to respond to Redden's order for a new plan later this year for operating dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers to protect endangered salmon.