

Idaho Statesman

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Our View: The case for breaching is stronger than ever

On July 20, 1997, the Idaho Statesman published its first editorial supporting the removal of four lower Snake River dams — a bold step that will best preserve Idaho's salmon, and best protect Idaho's water users. Ten years later, the dams remain in place. Idaho chinook salmon returns lag 34 percent behind their 1997 pace. Amidst a continuing drought, Idaho water users battle for a share of a finite source. What happened?

And what happens next?

1997

"Four dams in Washington are holding Idaho's economy hostage. The dams on the Lower Snake River once provided cheap power and hope for economic prosperity for Lewiston. But now these dams are a burden on Idaho and the Northwest.

"The region won't be set free until the salmon and steelhead these dams kill are recovered and balance is restored to our economy, environment and culture.

"This can't be done unless the four Lower Snake River dams — Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite — are breached."

Those words are as true as they were in July 1997. The argument for breaching, if anything, is stronger.

Idaho's salmon are a decade closer to extinction. Our economy remains hostage to outmoded out-of-state dams — and to the political gridlock that protects them, at the expense of the salmon.

1998

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission — a panel answering to Republican Gov. Phil Batt, and headed by Fred Wood, now a GOP state legislator from Burley — said returning the lower Snake River to its natural state offers the best solution for saving salmon and steelhead.

The commission stopped short of endorsing breaching, but came refreshingly close. Said Keith Carlson, a commissioner from Lewiston: "We're loud and clear — the dams are the problem."

The dams still are the problem. And there's a related problem: a speak-no-evil syndrome. Political leaders in Idaho, the state that would most benefit from breaching, refuse to acknowledge the damage inflicted by the dams.

1999

Fifty-eight miles upriver from the Atlantic Ocean, more than 2,000 miles from Idaho salmon country, the federal government made history. For the first time, the feds removed a dam for environmental purposes, against the will of its owner.

Since the removal of the Edwards Dam, the Kennebec River has rebounded. Fish numbers are up. Water quality has improved. The words of then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt proved prophetic. "What we are

doing today is an act of creation. This is the beginning of something that is going to happen across the nation."

Indeed, more than 200 dams have gone down since then, according to the conservation group American Rivers. Other removal efforts are in the works. Yet the lower Snake dams remain in place, blocking Idaho's river ecosystem from returning to its full potential.

2000

In its final days in office, this same Clinton administration took no action on breaching the lower Snake dams. Instead, their salmon recovery plan established a series of three-, five- and eight-year milestones for the Bush administration. All this while acknowledging dam operations threaten salmon.

U.S. District Judge James Redden rejected the Clinton plan.

By punting to a Bush administration that would prove openly hostile to breaching, the Clinton White House squandered its last chance to advance salmon recovery in Idaho. And in 2009, the next administration, Republican or Democrat, is likely to assume control over Idaho salmon runs that remain in peril — after nearly two decades on the feds' endangered species list.

2001

For one brief moment, Idaho salmon enjoyed a renaissance. The counts at the Lower Granite Dam near Lewiston — the last dam standing between Snake River salmon and their Idaho spawning grounds — had never been higher. Rural Idaho communities such as Stanley and Riggins reeled in nearly a \$90 million haul from the salmon fishing season.

This has proven to be only a tease, for Idaho anglers and communities alike. Idahoans cannot plan on a salmon fishing season; opportunities come only when fish return in "surplus" numbers that exceed what's needed to sustain hatchery operations. Idaho communities cannot hope for the economic bounty that could come from annual fishing — some \$544 million a year, according to a February 2005 study by Boise economist Don Reading.

However, anglers and entrepreneurs won't pour this kind of money in small-town Idaho until, or unless, salmon return consistently. And Idaho salmon runs haven't come close to duplicating 2001.

2002

The study's findings seemed novel at the time: Global warming could cut into the West's snowpack, drying up the region's water supply just as growth increases the demand. The region could face an unsavory choice: Use water for hydroelectric production or use it to help spring and summer salmon run.

Now, the Scripps Institution of Oceanography report seems prescient. The effects of climate change, such as reduced snowpack, are accepted enough that even Idaho Gov. Butch Otter admits to the possibility. The specter of global warming has even turned fisheries biologist Don Chapman into a breaching advocate; Chapman had spent a professional career arguing for dams, and against breaching, as a respected consultant for the hydro industry.

Breaching doesn't just help Idaho salmon; it helps Idaho water users. As long as young salmon continue fighting around dams, with limited success, Idaho will face continued pressure to release more water to flush the fish around the dams. In a time of global warming, drought and growth, Idaho needs to assume greater control over its precious water.

2003

The Northwest's four governors — including then-Gov. Dirk Kempthorne — issued a series of salmon recommendations that accurately describe the region's politics. "The challenge for the Columbia Basin is to overcome the propensity for paralysis."

Five pages later, the governors weaken their call to action by rejecting — flatly — the quickest path to salmon preservation. "Breaching the four lower Snake River dams must not be an option."

Crafting a salmon solution will be inherently complicated, involving four states, Northwest tribes and an acronym amalgam of federal agencies. But when the region's leaders gather at the table, Idaho leaders need to remember one point: the lower Snake dams impact Idaho's fish. When they join neighboring states in opposition to breaching, they literally sell our fish down the river.

2004

Rather than talking about breaching, the feds instead tried to lower the bar for salmon recovery. They pushed a plan to allow them to count wild salmon and hatchery fish interchangeably in measuring salmon recovery.

Even the feds acknowledged that some research points to "behavioral differences that result in diminished fitness and survival of hatchery fish relative to naturally spawned populations." Let's be clear. This wasn't about the science, and was all about the numbers. Weaker hatchery-raised fish are more abundant, comprising 80 percent of salmon runs, so their numbers do inflate salmon counts.

Last month, a federal judge rejected the feds' numbers game, providing a lesson to the Northwest. It's not about numbers; it's about saving the wild fish that will save the species.

2005

It was bad enough for President Bush to stand at Ice Harbor Dam — as he did in August 2003 — and assert that his administration had taken significant steps to help salmon. It was preposterous for his administration to go to court and smugly suggest that these same man-made dams are simply part of the natural river system that salmon must navigate.

Enter Redden, with a ruling that finally reopened the breaching debate.

In a May 2005 ruling, the judge rejected the bogus premise of dams as a natural component of the river. He also offered an honest appraisal of the state of salmon, 4 1/2 years into Bush's tenure. "It is apparent that the listed species are in serious decline and not evidencing signs of recovery."

2006

The dams' backers talk about what would be lost to breaching: a source of about 5 percent of the region's electricity, a slackwater river linking the Port of Lewiston to the Pacific. What if we pay for these tangible but replaceable amenities with both our salmon and our tax dollars?

An unusual alliance of fish advocates and budget hawks advanced this argument last fall. In their study, titled "Revenue Stream," they argue that breaching would reduce the cost of salmon recovery efforts, saving taxpayers and Northwest ratepayers \$2 billion to \$5 billion over 20 years.

This wasn't the first study to suggest the dams simply don't pencil out. It's another reminder that dam breaching is a national issue.

In an era of federal deficits, how much use will Congress have for dams that indiscriminately chew up fish and swallow up tax dollars?

2007

At least 65 members of Congress want to have a sober discussion, based in facts, about the future of the dams.

They have co-sponsored a bill to assign the General Accounting Office, the auditing arm of Congress, to study the pros and cons of breaching. They want to know how breaching would affect jobs, irrigation, transportation and energy.

It's a start — years later than we would have hoped. But breaching, when it occurs, will bring tumultuous transition to the Northwest's economy. Change, however justified, is never easy. We believe a GAO study will not only make the case for breaching, but suggest the parameters for building a region without the four dams.

2017

Salmon embody endurance. Idaho's sockeye climb 6,500 feet and swim 900 miles to reach Redfish Lake — as their ancestors have for 10,000 years. But no sockeye have returned yet this year and only 349 have reached the Stanley Basin since 1997 — less than three dozen fish a year. A species that has survived for millennia is fast running out of decades.

What will we be able to say about ourselves 10 years from now? Did we stand up to protect fish that are a symbol of everything that is best and most wild about Idaho? Or did we stand up for a symbol of a bygone dam-building age?

We stand where we stood a decade ago and repeat what we said on July 20, 1997: "Breaching the four dams is not a step backward. It is a step forward."

It is also, more than ever, a necessary step.

"Our View" is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman's editorial board.