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RiverPartners dismisses salmon rally as publicity stunt

PORTLAND, Ore. — Efforts by tribes, environmental advocates and sportfishing organizations to remove our region's dams will do little to help salmon and will devastate the region's economy, argues Northwest RiverPartners, a cooperative of Pacific Northwest farmers, electric utilities, and large and small businesses.

Today's salmon bake gathering at Sellwood Riverfront Park in Portland is calling for the removal of dams on the Snake River based on the misguided idea that this drastic action is necessary to boost salmon runs.

"This publicity stunt flies in the face of real progress being made in salmon recovery," said Terry Flores, executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. "Let's recognize this for what it is: an effort directed and funded by interests largely outside the region, and by many people who won't suffer the consequences of dam removal to our fish or our economy."

Flores said we need to begin with the understanding that both salmon and hydroelectricity are valuable and that both are worth preserving.

"The tradeoff simply doesn't make sense," Flores said. "Removing these dams has been analyzed and rejected because studies show it's simply not a credible option to help listed fish. The benefit of breaching the dams would be miniscule compared to the cost. It would help very few runs of listed salmon and would be devastating to the region's economy."

"There is no scientific reason to believe that dam breaching will enhance salmon runs," she said. "Between 2001 and 2004 some of the highest salmon runs in history occurred – with the dams in place. Our position is based in sound science not advocacy science. We're concerned with salmon protection and recovery, not salmon rhetoric."

Despite doomsday predictions, overall, fish runs are improving. There are more fish in the Columbia River now than before Bonneville Dam, the first federal project, was built in 1938. This year many of the stocks are above 10 year averages.

"The four Snake River dams these groups want to see removed have been in place for over 30 years, and the record salmon returns of 2001 provided irrefutable evidence that dams are only one of many factors that impact our migratory fish runs," Flores said.

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In addition, adult survival of salmon and steelhead at and between hydroelectric dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers is averaging 98 percent or better in recent years, based on recent pit tag research. Salmon numbers on coastal rivers without dams have been down the past few years indicating that oceanic downturn, over-harvesting, gill-netting or any number of variables can affect these fish. Commercial coastal fishing was closed this past year due to low numbers of returns to the Klamath.

“We’re trying to find a balance so that fish are helped, and these rivers can benefit Northwest families and businesses,” Flores said. “We’re working with regional stakeholders, and scientists on solutions that will actually help listed stocks without devastating the region’s economy.”

The costs to the region would be profound: Breaching the dams would eliminate the ability of inland farmers and other producers the option of barging their goods to world markets. It also would remove more than 3,000 megawatts of clean, renewable hydroelectric energy that would need to be replaced most likely by burning coal or natural gas. That’s enough electricity to power a city the size of Seattle.

“These Portland rallies may help these groups gain publicity, but fail to provide any practical help to salmon and steelhead in the Northwest..”