

Two states, divided by salmon

Unlike Oregon, Washington supports federal Columbia River fish recovery plans that leave dams' power output essentially intact

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Oregon and Washington not only sit on opposite sides of the Columbia River, but they're also taking opposite sides in a landmark case on how much should be done for the river's troubled salmon runs.

The interstate feud over fish has far-reaching consequences because it will help decide the future of the river's massive hydroelectric dams. While the dams supply inexpensive energy, they also kill many young salmon migrating past.

Though fish drive the dispute, the economic stakes are high: Washington enjoys more discounted hydropower because of its higher number of public utilities and stands to reap federal money for restoring salmon habitat. Oregon, on the other hand, does not gain the same benefits from the dams and is pushing to do more for salmon.

Washington, siding with the Bonneville Power Administration, which distributes the hydropower, and many electric utilities that buy the power, likes the federal government's proposal to help salmon hurt by the dams. It does a better job focusing aid on the salmon runs that need it, Washington argues.

But Oregon, siding with conservation and fishing groups and some Native American tribes, sees the federal approach as pretty close to awful. It offers no new help for fish and may illegally ignore the federal mandate to help endangered species, Oregon says in court filings.

The states are taking sides in a long-running court fight over salmon and dams. A U.S. district judge in Portland threw out earlier federal attempts to offset the damage dams do to salmon, saying they did not go far enough. The latest federal proposal may represent the government's last chance.

Oregon insists the federal government do far more for fish, even if it means drawing less hydropower from the dams.

The two states were united in criticizing earlier federal proposals to help salmon, but split over the most recent one. The governors of each state, who are in step on many Northwest issues, are setting opposing directions.

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski is taking his position based on the advice of state fish biologists, said Michael Carrier, his natural resources adviser. But Bob Nichols, adviser to Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, said that given the uncertainty over what's best for salmon, the federal government is finally on the right course.

"We're pushing the feds hard," Nichols said. "We think they're in the ballpark."

Others point out, however, that Washington reaps greater benefits from cheap hydroelectric power pulsing from the dams, and has the most to lose if that power is sacrificed for salmon.

That's because compared with Oregon, far more of Washington's population gets power from public utility districts and municipal utilities. They are first in line for electricity from the dams and get that power at a discount rate.

In contrast, about three-fourths of Oregon's population gets electricity from private power companies such as Portland General Electric and Pacific Power. They can buy electricity from the Columbia River dams, but do so on the competitive market where rates are usually higher.

Residential and small farm customers of the private Oregon utilities used to get a share of less-expensive hydropower, but a recent court decision eliminated that benefit.

"If you're the governor of Oregon and you see most of the benefits going to Washington, not your state, you look at it and say, 'What am I getting out of it?'" said Charles Hudson of the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission, which is based in Portland and generally sides with Oregon.

Washington has become a cheerleader for federal agencies that aren't doing enough for salmon, said Todd True, an attorney with Earthjustice who is arguing the court case for conservation and fisheries groups.

"I don't know if Washington has lost its interest in salmon or what's going on," he said.

Another possible benefit for Washington: More federal money to restore salmon habitat on tributaries of the Columbia, a key piece of the government proposal to offset damage done by dams.

But Nichols said that has nothing to do with Washington's position in the court case.

"It's what's best for the fish, not who gets more and who gets less," he said.

He said the new federal blueprint is stronger because it looks at each population of imperiled salmon individually and how best to help them. He said the federal agencies have also been more interested in input from the states and tribes joining participating in negotiations toward an agreement all can live with.

"It comes down to the science -- how do you use the best available science and what does it tell you," Nichols said.

"There's lots of uncertainty out there, and people will interpret it in different ways."

Washington is aligned in the court case with Idaho and Montana, which are also looking out for their own interests upstream.

For Kulongoski, the interpretation that counts comes from state biologists, Carrier said.

"He really prides himself on the fact that he feels he's got some of the best of the best working for him," Carrier said.

"His first instinct is to follow their advice and not succumb to political considerations at the expense of good biological advice."

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