

The following is a column for **Wheat Life**, published by the *Washington Wheat Growers*. It criticizes a recent economic study recommending removal of the Snake River dams.

Bob Stokes – December 2006

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**They never quit. The dam busters just released another anti-Snake River dam study.**

**"Revenue Stream," authored by Save our Wild Salmon (SOWS), claims removing the 4 lower Snake River dams will benefit the Northwest Economy. For non-salmon junkies, SOWS is a coalition devoted to Snake River dam removal. Its most significant members are national environmental groups like the Sierra Club, American Rivers and the National Wildlife Federation.**

**That's not how SOWS wants to be known. As described in their website, SOWS is a "nationwide coalition of conservation organizations, commercial and sport fishing associations, businesses, river groups and taxpayer advocates." In my numerous contacts with SOWS, I have only run into people whose primary loyalty is to Sierra Club-type environmentalism. I leave readers to search for "real" (as opposed to ceremonial) involvement by the other mentioned categories, particularly "business and taxpayer advocates."**

**Such political cross-dressing is common: Democrats for Nixon (Nixon campaign staffers), Coalition Against Bigger Trucks (railroad lobbyists), Republicans for Environmental Protection (more Sierra Club-type environmentalists) and so on. A decade ago the Humane Society of the United States (animal rights) sponsored numerous state initiatives banning various types of hunting, usually hound hunting. I don't consider myself a political green horn. However, they initially fooled me into believing their Washington initiative was home grown - even supported by some of my fellow hunters!**

**Those who deceive about their identity and motives will do so in other ways. From that skeptical perspective, let's look at the latest SOWS economic study.**

**Reasonable people can (and do) differ over the cost of discarding enough electricity to supply Seattle or Portland (1200 megawatts). Figures vary widely depending on the year considered and marketing assumptions. The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) values Snake River Dam power at \$600 million per year. Reasonable people also differ concerning how much, if any, benefit that economic sacrifice would provide to salmon.**

**However, only SOWS has the shameless gall to suggest dam busting would be economically beneficial, to either the nation or the Northwest. Previous SOWS inspired economic studies have drawn severe criticism from the officials actually responsible for reconciling Columbia River dams and salmon. Soon after its release, they reacted in similar fashion to claims made in "Revenue Stream."**

**Robert Lohn, Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries, the lead federal agency for Columbia River salmon conservation and ESA compliance, "simplistic" . . . paints the groups' [SOWS] desired picture with a selective use of facts."**

**Congressional representatives of the Inland Northwesterners who would pay most of the costs of Snake River dam removal had even harsher words. Representative Doc Hastings (R, Central Washington) "[T]he report dismisses scientific data showing salmon are returning in record numbers . . . These groups [SOWS] will go to any extreme to push their dam removal agenda. They'll manufacture a study or ignore scientific facts whatever it**

takes to tear out our dams." Representative Cathy McMorris (R Eastern Washington) "[K]eeping our dams and having healthy salmon does not have to be mutually exclusive. . . Removal of the dams would only cause detrimental harm to the economy and lifestyle of the Pacific Northwest"

Wenatchee World journalist Tracy Warner hit the nail on the head. "It doesn't matter that the numbers [in Revenue Stream] are phony. It matters that somebody believes them."

Let's see what we can do about that.

Most of the economic benefits claimed in "Revenue Stream" are supposed reductions in costs of other salmon saving measures. The report credits Snake River dam removal with eliminating the need for about half the \$600 million/yr cost of the current Columbia River salmon conservation plan (BiOp 2004). Let's use that \$300 million/yr benefit as a reference point.

Only 4 of the 13 Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed Columbia River salmon populations cited in BiOp 2004 spawn in the Snake River Basin. Also, most currently planned improvements in Snake River salmon passage facilities have been completed, paid for, and are already saving salmon. Getting juvenile salmon through reservoirs is more difficult. For decades the Corps of Engineers (COE) has, instead, barged them around reservoirs, also with great success, at a cost of about \$5 million/yr. Add \$50 million/yr for other future Snake River salmon conservation measures. That totals \$55 million/yr. Which part of 55 equals 300? Even if I missed some items, something is very strange about "Revenue Stream's" estimate of Snake River dam removal benefits.

Equally amazing, the cost estimate completely ignores actual electricity prices. Most of what "Revenue Stream's" author's call costs of replacing Snake River dam hydro capacity really amount to costs of getting along without electricity. This is called "conservation" in environmentalist lingo. It's like using the price of hamburger to evaluate the steak you really wanted.

Had enough? If not, read the whole report at <http://www.wildsalmon.org/>.

Fortunately, help is on the way. The experts on salmon conservation and its costs are the staff and advisors of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council (NPCC). The Northwest Power Planning Act of 1980 created NWPPC to reconcile Columbia River salmon and dams in a cost-effective, non-economically disruptive manner. They have been doing so admirably ever since.

As I write (early Dec), NPCC is considering instructing its Independent Economic Advisory Board to review "Revenue Stream." Knowing the scholarly standards of that group, that review should be informative. Circumstances permitting, I will devote a column to it early next year.

In the meantime, get the straight story about Columbia River salmon economics from NPCC's knowledgeable staff and informative reports through their website <http://www.nwcouncil.org/>. For a pro-dam perspective, consult Northwest RiverPartners <http://www.nwrivernpartners.org/>.

Some defenders of Columbia River dams suggest ignoring SOWS reports rather than further publicizing them by criticism. Not a bad idea, though also with hazards. Previous misleading (but unanswered) SOWS attacks on practical salmon conservation measures have delayed or otherwise complicated their implementation.

**Barging and supplementation hatcheries illustrate. Barging transports juvenile salmon around dams and reservoirs. Supplementation hatcheries shield portions of "wild" (in-stream spawning) salmon during vulnerable early life stages, like humans are shielded as infants in hospitals. Supplementation hatchery salmon not only mature in the wild but reproduce under entirely wild (in-stream) conditions, except for the, typically minority, of adults selected during subsequent rounds of supplementation.**

**Barging and supplementation hatcheries both build on a century of global experience with public and private salmon and trout culture, augmented by decades of experience in the Columbia River. Extensive scientific monitoring during the past decade provides a clearer, and increasingly positive, picture of the contributions of both programs.**

**However, if you consult the SOWS website (cited above), you will find condemnation of those programs. Why? Shouldn't genuine friends of salmon cheer when experience and science say programs for their conservation are working? Because they authored "Revenue Stream" SOWS staff must be equally committed to cost economy (ya). So you would expect them to be pleased that barging and supplementation hatcheries are low cost and non-disruptive of other (non-salmon) river uses.**

**It does not take long to explain the contradiction. As proudly stated in their literature, the real goal of SOWS and its constituent environmental groups is not saving salmon. It is saving natural, free running (undammed) rivers, with or without salmon.**

**There is nothing dishonorable about that. Though not my sport (yet), I am sure I would enjoy white water rafting. Neither is there anything dishonorable about defending free running rivers from "enslavement" (impoundment) by techno-capitalisto-Western civilization. Strange, to me anyway, but not dishonorable.**

**That is, not dishonorable until those motives are masked behind concern for salmon. More people fish for salmon than raft rivers. Whether fishermen or not, more care about protecting salmon from extinction than about freeing rivers from human "domination." Then there is the legal leverage of ESA, enormous but only applicable to listed species and their designated habitats. ESA does not preserve natural environments (like free running rivers) for their own sake. One assumes SOWS slights of hand are intended to increase support for virtually the only salmon saving measure that also "frees" rivers, that being dam removal.**

**Intuition and experience warns us about people wearing masks. Likewise groups that mask their exotic interests and ideologies behind popular pursuits and values. To understand why those are sound judgments, learn more about Save our Wild Salmon.**