



Listen, Science is Trying to Tell Us Something

Sound science. Those two words are prominent in Northwest RiverPartners mission. We promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake rivers *and* we want *sound science* to lead the way in salmon recovery. So what is the latest science telling us?

A report recently released by the Independent Scientific Review Panel (commonly called the ISRP) caught our attention. The 11-member panel of distinguished scientists provides independent science review of BPA fish and wildlife projects that are funded by Northwest citizens to the tune of several hundred million dollars every year.

In its report, the ISRP addressed the use of salmon hatcheries. Hatcheries are being used in the Northwest in two ways: to produce lots of fish for commercial, tribal and sport fishing, and in a more experimental way as a means to boost wild fish runs.

Frankly, the ISRP didn't have a lot of good things to say about using hatcheries to help wild runs with a practice called "supplementation," which puts hatchery-raised salmon onto the spawning grounds along with wild fish. In short, the reviewers said the practice likely compromises the long-term health of the wild population.



That sort of statement, which appears in the report in carefully nuanced terms, gets the attention of the hatchery managers who use supplementation, particularly those who see it as a way to increase salmon fishing. The ISRP's focus however is on science, not commercial, tribal or sports fishing opportunities or fish and wildlife budgets that rely in part on revenues from selling fishing licenses. The scientists did say supplementation can play an important role in providing a safety net for very depressed wild runs, like the nearly extinct Snake River sockeye salmon.

Habitat also figured into the ISRP's report. In particular, the scientists were skeptical of making short-term judgments about whether improvements in habitat are recovering salmon runs. They pointed out it could take decades to measure the effects of actions like restoring native plantings or removing culverts along river banks to help salmon.

This has implications for the salmon plan, or Biological Opinion, on federal hydro system operations. Habitat actions totaling \$100 million a year are a key component to help put salmon on

the road to recovery. While common sense tells us that such actions are benefitting fish, quantifying the extent of the gains in the short term will be challenging.



By Tom Sackitt / courtesy Idaho Rivers United

And on another hot topic in the salmon recovery world, the science continues to tell us – in this instance via NOAA Fisheries Service – that transporting or barging young salmon vs. keeping them in the river and spilling them through the dams from late April through May results in more returning adults. This was true across all species, both wild and hatchery Chinook and steelhead. Earlier in the season adult return rates are about the same for in-river or barged fish.

If science is going to be our guide on transportation, then we ought to be following the NOAA Fisheries Service data and barge all the young fish later in the migration season. But science didn't sway Judge Redden who repeatedly ruled in favor of river spill operations through August in lieu of barging. It remains to be seen what the new judge will say about that.

New fish science rarely makes headlines, but we keep it high on our radar. Salmon runs declined over time due to a number of factors and likewise they won't recover overnight. Their recovery will be a product of many actions – and people -- working together. Meanwhile, we like to stay grounded in the research and push for policies and legal decisions that embrace what the science is telling us.



Terry Flores is Executive Director of Northwest River Partners, an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers and salmon recovery policies based on sound science.

For more information, please visit www.nwriverpartners.org.