

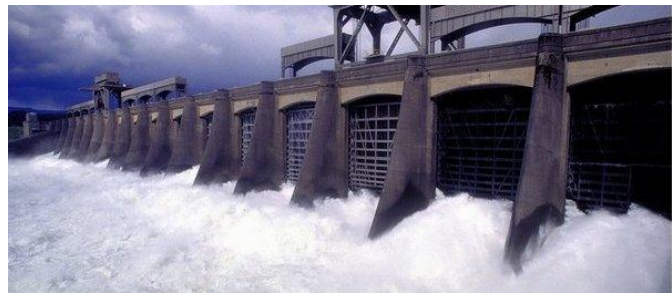
Unexpected Deluge Puts Policy Conflicts in Spotlight

All is (relatively) quiet on the litigation front as we wait for the schedule to play out. There is reason for optimism with Judge Redden agreeing to a briefing schedule on the Supplemental Biological Opinion (BiOp) that puts a potential ruling near year's end. And, for the first time in the long-running litigation, he also limited the number of issues that can be briefed. The plaintiffs will not be allowed to rehash their tired arguments on *everything*, but will only be permitted to address new issues raised in the supplemental BiOp.

That said, it certainly hasn't been calm on the rivers. Our low water year took a precipitous turn in early June with a big slug of water from late-season rains swelling river systems throughout the Columbia basin.

Things got crazy fast!

The deluge of water meant excess spill – when large volumes of water plunge over the spillways at the dams. The turbulence from too much spill leads to high levels of gas in the water that can be fatal to fish; it gives them “the bends”. A lot of the water in June came into the system at lower elevations, where there isn't much storage, and upriver reservoirs were getting full. With system operators obliged to cut spill to meet state and federal gas standards, the water had to be sent through the turbines at the dams.



This situation brought into sharp focus the complexities surrounding river and hydro operations as the federal agencies (U.S. Army Corps, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bonneville Power Administration) scrambled to keep the fish moving safely downstream, the power system whole, and the Columbia River from flooding.

BPA called on power generators in the region to back-down their own resources and take BPA's hydropower – at times, giving it away. And while BPA rushed to find a sink for the excess electrons, the region's growing wind fleet continued to generate, exacerbating the problem.

Meanwhile, the Corps worked to prevent flooding. The agency responded to soaring flow forecasts by among other things, authorizing temporary storage in the pool at John Day Dam to keep the river below flood stage at Vancouver, Washington. And, as in the old adage “when it

rains, it pours”, in the midst of the excitement, a barge hit the guide wall at the navigation lock at Lower Granite Dam, forcing closure of three spillbays just when they were badly needed to handle unexpected river flows.

June 2010 certainly put system operators to the test and illustrated just how complicated it is to run an enormous multiple-use system like our Columbia and Snake River system. The crisis has eased, but there’s still a lot of water to get through the system. And with so much turbulence, gas levels remain high, not a healthy situation for fish.

There are several weighty lessons to take from this combination of unexpected weather and operating conditions:

- We now have a mix of policies – from the Endangered Species Act and the federal salmon plan which is implementing it -- to state water quality standards, flood control requirements, and mandates for acquiring new wind resources, that add up to an operating environment fraught with complexity and conflicts.
- It takes experts across disciplines and agencies to maintain equilibrium in the system, especially in times like these.
- For every action on the hydro system, there is a reaction. You can’t wrench on one element without affecting the rest. It is an extremely delicate balancing act that can easily spin out of control with negative consequences for people, property and fish.

While we applaud the agencies for their fast and effective maneuvers to keep flooding at bay, and energy and fish needs balanced, we are struck by the need for analysis of how all these policies interact. Are we brewing conflicts that can’t be solved like they were this time? The events of June 2010 give us a good opportunity to consider whether our policies add up to a well-oiled machine or a Rube Goldberg contraption that may be undone.



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.