



Fish Price Tag Demands Ongoing Scrutiny



There is nothing like an \$802 million price tag to prompt a lot of reflection. The figure is Bonneville Power Administration's 2010 fish and wildlife expenditures. As a trade publication recently put it, the expenditures amount to \$340 per chinook, sockeye and steelhead that passed Bonneville Dam in 2010.

While \$802 million may not seem like a lot when Congress is struggling to come up with trillions of dollars to reduce the nation's debt, it is a very real figure to people here in the Northwest who pay it. And when you add \$802 million to the decades-long tally, Northwest families and businesses have put \$11.8 billion toward fish and wildlife since 1978.

About one-third of what a public utility pays BPA for power goes to fish and wildlife expenditures. That translates to about \$15 to \$20 a month out of a \$100 retail electric bill.

What are we really paying for?

Quite simply, these costs are incurred to comply with laws that are intended to protect salmon and other critters and to mitigate for the impacts of the federal dams. The costs include many things: habitat restoration, construction and maintenance of fish hatcheries, new technologies to help fish pass by dams, and changes in hydro operations and river flows to get fish downstream.

One of Northwest RiverPartners most critical jobs is to see that we are getting our money's worth.

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council is the focus of much of that effort. We are working with the Council, BPA and our industry allies to contain escalating fish and wildlife costs and to evaluate whether measures we pay for are delivering real benefits. Just as Congress is struggling to cut the federal budget, we know it is tough to make inroads into institutionalized expenditures.



A case in point: this spring, RiverPartners joined with the Public Power Council, PNGC Power and Northwest Requirements utilities, to zero in on a group of ongoing research, monitoring and evaluation projects under review by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

Our team determined at least half of the \$34 million spent on these “Group B” projects should be eliminated from BPA’s program. Why? For starters, independent science reviewers had problems with many of the projects. And many aren’t related to impacts of the federal dams, which is BPA’s mitigation responsibility under the law.

Take for example, coded-wire tags that state biologists use to mark hatchery fish and distinguish where they come from. BPA customers pay millions of dollars for these tags used primarily to manage fish harvest. Sturgeon? Customers shell out for sturgeon studies when the main problem these fish are experiencing is one of over-harvest. And research in the ocean? It’s interesting, but why should BPA customers fork over nearly \$4 million annually to fund it, when most of the dollars go to another federal agency, NOAA Fisheries.

Despite our good arguments, it looks like these projects will continue at least for some time. We wish the Council had made immediate reductions, but we made progress and will continue to work with them and our team to press for cuts.

Fish and wildlife budgets have to be transparent, accountable and clearly target BPA’s mitigation responsibilities. We must find savings and reprioritize funds to ensure that dollars from Northwest families and businesses go to on-the-ground efforts that directly benefit fish and wildlife – not to “nice but not necessary” research or to shore up bureaucracies. Nothing says that more clearly than an \$802 million annual price tag, and an \$11.8 billion cumulative total!



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.