



### Breaching Advocates Long on “*Truthiness*”

A few years ago, the comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term “*truthiness*.” According to Colbert’s website, *truthiness* is “what you want the facts to be, as opposed to what the facts are. . . what feels like the right answer, as opposed to what reality will support.”

The term always comes to mind when I see or hear the recycled arguments used by proponents of dam breaching and those suing over the new salmon plan or Biological Opinion (BiOp). They make bold and inflammatory claims to support their arguments, but sadly, these statements are often long on *truthiness* and short on truthfulness.



Let’s take a look at a few of the most egregious we hear again and again.

**Claim: The 2008 BiOp is a product of the Bush Administration. Key stakeholders were excluded.**

**Truth: The 2008 BiOp is the product of collaboration among Northwest states, tribes, and federal agencies; all stakeholders had an opportunity to participate.**

This BiOp was developed while George W. Bush was President. But that’s where the truth in such a characterization ends.

The collaboration took two and a-half years and involved policy representatives from the Northwest’s federal and state agencies and tribal sovereigns. All stakeholders, including river users and environmental and fishing groups, were invited to participate in technical working groups and in review of the BiOp. And, in a complete departure from typical practice, the 2008 BiOp was opened to public comment, which helped shape the final product.

The region’s Independent Scientific Advisory Board was brought in to review issues related to hydro impacts. NOAA Fisheries had its award-winning Science Center fisheries staff, not political appointees, vet the data and science approach.

Let’s review: the BiOp was developed collaboratively by salmon managers; key science issues underwent independent review; all stakeholders had an opportunity to participate; and public comment was encouraged. The attempt to link the development of the 2008 BiOp with the Bush Administration is, well, a perfect example of *truthiness*.

**Claim: Columbia River salmon are going extinct.**

**Truth: Salmon and steelhead counts in the Columbia River are higher now than when fish were first counted at Bonneville Dam in 1938.**

No one argues that there are far fewer salmon in the river than there were centuries ago. All kinds of human impacts have taken a toll. But actual data, as opposed to rhetorical gamesmanship, show that the number of salmon in the Columbia River has increased over the past 80 years, and the salmon are neither going extinct nor are they on a path to extinction.

Since 2000, average fish passage at Bonneville Dam has been over 1 million fish each year. This is twice the number of fish passing the dam than when it began operating. This includes populations of both hatchery and wild fish.

Although historically year-by-year salmon returns show a great deal of volatility, the five-year averages of most wild species are better than when the fish were first listed under the Endangered Species Act in the 1990s. As examples, Snake River sockeye are returning in numbers that haven't been seen since the 1950s, and this year is another record setter. Summer chinook populations have tripled since the 1980s.

**Claim: The lower Snake River dams should be breached to offset climate-change impacts on fish.**

**Truth: Breaching the dams would add 4.5 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> to the air annually.**

The *truthiness* scale is pegged on this one. Climate change argues for preserving the Northwest hydrosystem, not dismantling it. According to an analysis by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council staff, replacing the generation from the four lower Snake River dams would increase CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the region by 4.5 million tons annually. Actions that increase carbon emissions would worsen the climate-change impacts on fish – and people – not make them better.

Proponents argue that breaching is needed to provide salmon access to colder water in the upper Snake. The four lower Snake River projects have highly effective adult fish passage facilities that do not block access to spawning habitat. Adult survival, at 98 percent or better per dam, is comparable to survival in a natural river.

Dam breaching would also cost the Northwest an important source of flexible backup generation that supports renewable wind power. Without that capacity, natural gas plants or other resources would be necessary, adding to climate concerns.

Truth easily becomes a casualty in our Internet, blogging, and twittering age, where falsehoods and half-truths can circle the globe in the blink of an eye. At RiverPartners, we cringe when the truth is distorted for ideological reasons. We believe in salmon recovery programs based on sound science and recognition that the region's economy and way of life depends on the use of natural resources, like the Columbia and Snake River system.

Let's tell it like it is. There's no place for *truthiness* in this discussion.



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*Northwest River Partners is 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.*

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