



Outmoded Dams May Come Down, But Hydro is Still King

The planned back-to-back removal of dams on the Elwha and White Salmon rivers marks the loss of renewable energy resources for the region. However, for these antiquated facilities it may make economic sense.

I see the removal of these outmoded dams as a symbol of the extraordinary legacy of hydropower in the Northwest. This occasion also reminds us of the economic and environmental value of hydropower to our region, and monumental differences between antiquated projects, like the Elwha and Condit dams, and major large multipurpose dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers. Unfortunately, some groups have seized on the removals on the Elwha and White Salmon rivers as an opportunity to advance the ill-conceived and unwarranted campaign to remove the Lower Snake River dams.



Elwha Dam

Hydropower provides upwards of 60 percent of the Northwest's energy, and it is a clean, non-polluting, renewable source of energy that makes us far less dependent than the rest of the country on electricity from coal, natural gas or nuclear plants. In fact, according to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, our "carbon footprint" is about half that of the rest of the nation, due to the contribution of hydropower to powering our economy and our lives.

The dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers – the backbone of our hydropower system – give us a LOT of power – more than 4,400 megawatts – enough to power FOUR cities the size of Seattle. There is simply no comparison in energy loss to the removal of the dams on the Elwha and White Salmon rivers.

But the contribution of the Columbia and Snake rivers doesn't stop there. As we all know, the wind doesn't always blow but the rivers always flow. Hydropower generation is consistent and fills in the energy gap when wind turbines are not spinning.

Skillful operation of much of the hydropower system in the region played a critical role this past spring in protecting our communities from potentially devastating flooding. The system also provides vital irrigation to farmers in Idaho and eastern Washington and Oregon to grow the crops that feed Northwest residents and are exported to the world.

The Columbia and Snake River dams are the region's work horses, providing energy and a waterborne transportation corridor moving millions of tons of food, paper, autos and other products while providing thousands of port and related jobs in local communities.

Dam removal advocates argue that salmon and dams cannot survive together. But let's not forget that while we are garnering environmental and economic benefits from our hydro system, we also are getting salmon safely around the structures and reclaiming natural spawning areas through a massive investment in habitat improvement.

These efforts for salmon are working; this decade we've seen some of the strongest salmon runs in the Columbia and Snake rivers in years.

While we're going to hear noise about the Elwha and Condit dam removals providing a model for the Snake dams, it will be from a minority. Our public opinion research shows that 73 percent of Northwest residents find removing Snake River dams to be an "extreme solution that could do more harm than good." This is up from 67 percent in 2010, so support for keeping the dams is only growing.

Citizens clearly understand and appreciate the difference between small antiquated dams and those that help power our homes and fuel our economy with clean, renewable hydropower – and make us the envy of the rest of the country!



John Prescott is chairman of Northwest RiverPartners an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers in Oregon, Idaho and Washington states, and he is President and CEO of PNGC Power, an electric generation and transmission cooperative owned by 16 electric distribution cooperative utilities with service territory in seven western states.