

## **Barging salmon makes sense when water low**

**By Terry Flores, Special to the Herald  
April 11, 2010**

I recently sat in a public meeting held by the region's Independent Scientific Advisory Board (ISAB) about how the federal hydro system should be operated this spring to benefit listed salmon and steelhead.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the regulatory agency responsible for the decision on operations, is proposing that more young fish be gathered at collection facilities at the Lower Snake River dams and then barged to below Bonneville Dam.

This is a change from years where half of the fish were collected and barged and half were spilled through the collector dams to get them downstream. Why the change?

Because this year will be a very low water year and keeping the young fish in the river and using spill to get them downstream will expose them to ominous conditions: low flows, high water temperatures and lots of predators.

All of these factors hurt salmon and steelhead, and according to the NOAA Science Center, will result in fewer adults returning to spawn. This includes salmon and steelhead listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act, with steelhead most affected.

Common sense supports barging this year. For more than 20 years this region has maximized the use of barging in poor water years, and recent science clearly favors it. NOAA expects 92,000 adult steelhead to return if young fish are barged and not spilled at the collector dams. If spill is provided at collector dams, only half that number are expected to survive.

Let's hit that again: NOAA's data shows that 46,000 fewer adult steelhead will return to spawn if young fish are spilled instead of getting a ride below Bonneville Dam. Put another way, this means that deciding to spill is tantamount to deciding to kill 46,000 adult steelhead that are listed under the ESA!

Yet at the ISAB's public hearing, representatives from the state of Oregon and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service advocated to do just that. Their rationale seemed to be that it would be a nice "experiment" to gather more data in a low flow year by choosing to keep half the young fish in the river.

In other words, they are willing to risk killing half the returning steelhead adults in the face of the NOAA Science Center's determination that barging would be twice as effective for them.

Even more recently, there have been opinion pieces and letters to newspapers suggesting the Obama administration turned its back on the science underpinning the federal salmon plan (biological opinion) in part because it does not include spilling more water through the dams this spring when low flow conditions exist.

In fact, one long-retired fisheries manager opined that, "Continuing spill, even in low-flow years, is an investment in the future." Yes, if you want to invest in a future with fewer returning adults!

Another public statement made recently is that we can rely on "intuition" to know that spill during out-migration leads to more juvenile salmon making it to the ocean. And, "We can acquire knowledge from the voice of reason, which is the best available science."

As Bill Cosby says, "Come on people!"

Such statements are astounding from those who contend they care about fish. The Obama administration conducted a rigorous six-month science review of the salmon plan.

The review was overseen by Dr. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA administrator and renowned fisheries expert, who in turn brought in independent world-class scientists to evaluate the work.

These scientists made comments to the effect that the plan was "a great scientific analysis ... one that could not have been done better" and, "An excellent analysis that used the best available science ... in an extremely thoughtful way."

That's why the administration affirmed what the plan had to say.

RiverPartners is not opposed to spill at the dams. To the contrary, it can be an effective tool if used properly. But spill does not make sense when it is shown to harm fish by keeping them in the river under poor conditions or when spill creates total dissolved gas levels that literally gas young fish to death. Nor does spill make sense in late summer, when very few fish are migrating and the additional cost of lost generation burdens Northwest families and businesses.

RiverPartners stands by its mission of promoting salmon restoration policies based in sound science and the most cost-effective ways to achieve them. This spring, that goal can best be accomplished by helping as many young fish as possible to get safely below Bonneville Dam, away from predators and warmer water.

We do not believe we should rely on anyone's "intuition" when the best available science tells us that spill will put half of the returning adult steelhead population at risk.

Come on people!

Terry Flores is the executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. For more information, visit [www.nwriverpartners.org](http://www.nwriverpartners.org).