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For healthy returns, juvenile salmon have to reach the ocean

Court-ordered spills of water on the Columbia River dam system are getting credit for helping ensure more juvenile fish reach the Pacific Ocean, where they can thrive and eventually return upstream.

Restoring iconic salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest has a corollary in the business world. Success equates to moving product.

Dramatic numbers of returning coho salmon to the upper and middle Columbia River, and equally impressive results for sockeye salmon in the Snake River basin, are directly related to quickly and safely reaching the Pacific Ocean.

Recent years of court-ordered spills at federal dams have ensured more juvenile fish are sped through the system and reach the ocean.

Michele DeHart, executive director of the Fish Passage Center in Portland, cites the role of spills in boosting fish returns.

Ocean conditions are a factor, but for fish to benefit they have to arrive alive and in good condition, DeHart emphasizes.

The elements that shape healthy fish runs are complicated and interconnected: habitat, hatcheries, harvest and hydro. Fish need healthy places to start life and return. Hatchery efforts seek sustainable numbers without complicating the recovery of wild salmon. Harvest has been curtailed and eliminated in line with conservation efforts. Hydro is shorthand for the dam system, and tensions over water for power generation and nurturing healthy salmon populations.

Spilling more water at the dams keeps fish out of the turbines, impacts water temperatures and reduces the need to transport fish around the dams. Faster migration toward the ocean gets credit for the success that is being measured and cheered.

Ocean conditions have been good, and hatchery programs were present and consistent in periods with disappointing numbers. High returns trace back in part to moving fish past dams.

Salmon in the Columbia and Snake River basins are reaching the ocean to compete for survival and return. Court-ordered spills have had a measurable impact.