

# The Seattle Times

Guest columnist

## Judge's ruling on Northwest salmon plan asks for clarity

A federal judge again has asked federal agencies to try harder on the Columbia River system plan to preserve salmon. Guest columnist Terry Flores argues the ruling is not a victory for groups who want to breach dams but a chance for a stronger plan.

By [Terry Flores](#)

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WITH U.S. District Judge James Redden's recent ruling on the federal Northwest salmon plan, we've seen the usual onslaught of anti-hydropower groups revving up their propaganda machinery, overreaching and claiming "victory" on a ruling that essentially preserves the plan. Even more astounding, they purport to "speak for business" on this issue.

Not so fast.

First, the judge sent the plan for the Columbia River system back to the federal agencies asking for more clarity on a fairly narrow issue — habitat-restoration benefits after 2013. Shouts that the plan is "illegal" or that it was tossed out are a gross overgeneralization.

In fact, Judge Redden gave the go-ahead to federal agencies to continue implementing the plan until 2014 — because it is working, as witnessed by some of the highest salmon returns we've seen in decades. The plan includes new technologies that move salmon safely past the dams, improvements in how fish are produced and managed at hatcheries, and a massive program to restore thousands of miles of habitat to help salmon thrive.

The judge did not question the plan's science, which was endorsed by the Obama administration and independent scientists. Nor did he agree to change hydro — or dam — operations; he maintained his own court-ordered water flows already in place. And he did not accept litigants' arguments over what the law requires to protect and recover species — the question at the heart of the legal case.

Does this sound like some kind of a wholesale condemnation of the salmon plan by the judge?

Hardly.

Furthermore, the anti-hydropower contingent orchestrated a letter to President Obama signed by a smorgasbord of chefs, specialty-food retailers and commercial fishing representatives (all of whom could better help save wild salmon by not killing, selling or serving them) and eco-outdoor apparel peddlers, purporting to speak for broad business interests on this issue.

This is absurd. It has been, and will continue to be, the Northwest's hardworking families and businesses who are footing this plan's bill through their electric rates to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Everyone is already paying for this plan, and we all deserve the chance to make it work.

Moreover, in their letter, which demands a new "stakeholder" process led by President Obama and Congress to develop a new salmon plan, they seem to have conveniently forgotten the last six years of unprecedented collaboration between federal and state agencies and tribes — probably because they didn't like the result. What we really need is less process and more action — which is why the vast majority of Northwest tribes, states, farmers, ports and businesses have supported the salmon plan.

While the theatrics of anti-hydro interests grab headlines, it's a lot more productive to stay engaged with our tribal, state and federal agency partners to do what the judge clearly asked for in his ruling: continue to implement the plan until 2014 and come back to him with more details and analysis on the benefits of habitat restoration in the plan's out years.

*Terry Flores is executive director of Northwest RiverPartners, 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.*