

# Obama administration will review its Northwest salmon and dams plan

By [Matthew Preusch, The Oregonian](#)

February 19, 2010



*Steelhead and salmon make their way up the Snake River through the viewing window at Lower Granite Dam.*

The federal government will spend three more months reconfiguring its plan for salmon and dams in the Columbia Basin in the hopes of pleasing a Portland judge.

Today's announcement by the government is the latest turn in a long-running litigation over federal agencies' strategy to run the Northwest's system of power-producing dams without pushing imperiled fish closer to extinction.

In a letter to [U.S. District Court Judge James Redden](#), the U.S. Department of Justice accepted the judge's proposal for the government to voluntarily review its plan before the judge rules on its merits.

The government earlier asked for something similar as a way to end a legal impasse over the plan, and today Jane Lubchenco, the Oregon ecologist and head of the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), said she was pleased with the direction of the case.



"We look forward to moving out of the courtroom and focusing on the protection and restoration efforts that make the most difference for Northwest salmon and the communities that rely on them," Lubchenco said in a statement.

Judge Redden has twice rejected earlier plans, called [biological opinions](#).

In a [February 10 letter](#) accompanying his proposed order for a so-called voluntary remand of the plan, Redden said the Obama administration needs to consider the "best available science" during its review.

"They cannot rely exclusively on materials that support one position, while ignoring new or opposing scientific information," Redden wrote.

Significantly, the judge said the government need not change the plan's jeopardy standard, the legal measure of whether the plan keeps fish from edging closer to extinction.

Opponents of the plan, which was first developed during the Bush administration and amended by the Obama administration last year, argue the jeopardy standard is does not meet the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

"The court noted that we do not need to start over from scratch, develop a new jeopardy framework or put at risk the progress made through the regional collaborative process," Lubchenco said. "However, we will review any new, pertinent scientific information to ensure that the BiOp and AMIP continue to be based on the best available science."

The judge also said the administration should provide more certainty that the plan, which relies in large part on expensive improvements to salmon habitat across the vast Columbia Basin, will be adequately funded into the future.

The plan is supported by a majority of Northwest tribes and states but opposed by the state of Oregon, the Nez Perce Tribe and a coalition of fishing and conservation groups, who argue it favors power production and shipping interests over threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead.

Earlier this month, the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society said in a [report](#) (PDF) that the Obama administration's plan was "inadequate for ensuring the protection of threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin."

Oregon has argued that the fish need higher flows in the Columbia River than the plan envisions, while salmon advocates contend the surest way to save the fish is to remove four federal dams on the lower Snake River.

"We hope they take the next three months to fix the salmon plan by addressing the concerns we, the judge, and the whole Western Division of the American Fisheries Society have raised," said Nicole Cordan of the group Save Our Wild Salmon. "Then maybe we could have a salmon plan that actually solves this long-standing debate in the region instead of just more litigation."

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