

It's time to stop debating and focus on rebuilding fish runs

READER'S VIEW: SALMON RECOVERY

GLENN VANSELOW –June 14, 2009

This region has spent many millions of dollars and 20 years of delay trying to appease a small minority of interests who want to breach the dams. Dam breach advocates have been promoting a new forum to debate the topic since before the 2008 election. A few elected officials have suggested that might be a good idea. While I understand their motivation to be a constructive part of a solution, a new forum is not the answer.

The original forum began 20 years ago with Sen. Mark Hatfield's Salmon Summit. Sen. Hatfield called the federal agencies, states, tribes and environmental and economic interests together in 1989 in response to the first Endangered Species Act listing petitions. The Salmon Summit was followed by many more public forums. A partial listing includes System Configuration Study, System Operation Review, public meetings and hearings on the ESA listings and Critical Habitat Designation, a drawdown study, innumerable flow survival studies, Northwest Power Planning Council framework sessions, a \$20 million environmental impact statement, and, ultimately, lawsuits. It is highly doubtful that one more meeting, one more forum, and one more media opportunity will bring everyone to a common vision on the dams.

I was a member of the Salmon Summit. Sen. Hatfield did the right thing at the time. He tried to bring all interests together to find common ground and solve the problem before the fish were listed. The first meeting of that forum held great promise as the senator asked the participants, one by one, "Are you committed to working together to solve this problem?" "Yes, senator," was each person's response.

However, as soon as Sen. Hatfield left the room, the abundant media present provided a golden opportunity for parties to solidify their positions, dig in their heels and stage media events to promote their views. The Salmon Summit turned into a media circus where far more energy was devoted to press conferences, parades and demonstrations featuring people in salmon suits than discussing salmon science or seeking common ground.

After 20 years, one thing is certain. We will never get 100 percent of the people to agree, for or against, on dam breaching. A small minority of interests want to continue the debate. They continue to seek new forums where they can promote their goal.

The region's job is not to make everybody happy or to provide endless forums to promote minority views. Its job is to do what is necessary to rebuild endangered fish runs. We have a biological opinion that is designed to do that. This BiOp is the product of an unprecedented collaboration among the scientists and fish managers from the federal government, Northwest tribes and the Northwest states. We believe the BiOp will stand up under rigorous scientific scrutiny. The BiOp provides more funding, more actions, more certainty and more cooperation for rebuilding fish runs than this region has ever seen.

This BiOp is supported by a majority of the treaty tribes, a majority of the non-treaty tribes and a majority of the states. The dams, with their abundant carbon-free energy and environmentally friendly transportation, are supported by a vast majority of the Northwest congressional delegation and a vast majority of the Northwest population.

Now is not the time to build a new debate hall. Now is the time to end the debate, get out of the courtroom, get behind the BiOp, and focus the region's attention on the on-the-ground recovery actions that will rebuild the fish runs.

Glenn Vanselow is the executive director of Pacific Northwest Waterways Association in Portland, Ore.