



RiverPartners: Make a Mark on the Council's Fish Program

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council's *Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program* is one of the most significant efforts in the region addressing fish and wildlife protection and enhancement. For those burning out on fish and wildlife processes, we urge you to pay attention to this one and send your comments to the Council.



The Council's program guides actions and investments made by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) in fish and wildlife paid for by Northwest families and businesses through their electric bills. It covers a lot of territory and is the foundation for hundreds of millions of dollars in fish and wildlife funding.

In recent years, that added up to \$143 million dollars annually, but the size of the obligation is poised to grow exponentially -- an additional \$90 million -- a 62 percent increase.

The increase is a result of the new salmon plan to mitigate the impacts of the federal hydrosystem on listed salmon and steelhead, and includes the costs of agreements reached with some states and tribes in the hydrosystem litigation before Judge James Redden.

The Council's Program links all of these commitments together, and, so far, RiverPartners likes a lot of the revisions proposed to its program. We hope our further comments will lead to even more changes.

The draft program, for the most part, walks the line between providing guidance to protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife, without being overly prescriptive. The program provides an overarching vision and strategies and stays relatively free of explicit measures.

One glaring exception is the Fish Passage Center (FPC). The program continues to name the FPC specifically instead of outlining the duties such an entity would carry out. No other vendor is called out in the program, and the FPC has not shown itself capable of being a dispassionate arbiter of scientific information. The Council needs to drop the Fish Passage Center reference or provide more oversight to make the Center fully accountable.

On the positive side, the Council has dropped its numerical goal for salmon restoration. Earlier programs referred to a goal of 5 million fish, a number not well grounded in science that created the

perception the hydro system was responsible for all losses. We're happy to see it gone and don't think the Council needs to hold a 2-year process, as they propose, to discuss it any further.

We also commend the Council for calling out hatchery production and harvest as areas the region must come to terms with if salmon and steelhead are to prosper. These are difficult issues and the Council has taken an important first step in raising their impacts.

On the other hand, we think the program is still short on clear objectives. The region must have a way to measure program success without ambiguity. Clear objectives, combined with independent science review, will help us gauge what we are getting for our investment.

We also want the Council to give more thought to priorities. The program says little about where the region should direct its efforts and dollars. The Council is the entity best-suited to identify where fish and wildlife dollars are currently going; and ask if they are going to the right resources, the right measures, and are proposed in the right areas.

As alluded to earlier, the ballooning of BPA's fish and wildlife budget puts additional pressure on the dollars, and the Council. We applaud the Council for its emphasis on independent science review for all projects, including those in the new salmon plan and other agreements.

We urge the Council to hold the spending line where it stands at \$230+ million annually. That is a *tremendous* investment by Northwest families and businesses, making up 20-30 percent of their electric bills, in increasing chaotic economic times. The Council plays an incredibly crucial role in seeing the investment is well-spent and doesn't increase further.

This is a link to a draft of the [Council's fish and wildlife program](#) is out for comment. We urge you to speak up during the comment period. If you'd like RiverPartners' talking points, contact Kay Gabriel at gabriel007@comcast.net or (206) 329-5961.