

Response to Oregonian pieces of Nov. 3 “U.S. makes scientific case to keep Snake dams intact” and Nov. 18 “Science shifting on dam removal”

Recent Oregonian pieces might lead readers to believe Snake River salmon can be restored with only “modest” measures, without breaching the lower Snake River dams. Professional fishery biologists have reached a different conclusion.

The American Fisheries Society (AFS) is a professional organization of scientists from many backgrounds, including state, tribal, and federal agencies, timber and power companies, consulting firms, and universities. We are not an environmental advocacy group. Most of us are not policy-makers. Our common tie is a professional responsibility to promote credible scientific information and to facilitate informed resource decisions.

The Oregon chapter, Idaho chapter, and Western Division of AFS have all passed resolutions that make clear our position that dam breaching is an essential element of Snake River salmon restoration.

The Oregon chapter said:

“If society-at-large wishes to restore these salmonids to sustainable, fishable levels, a significant portion of the lower Snake River must be returned to a free-flowing condition by breaching the four lower Snake River dams, and this action must happen soon; Substantive actions to address detrimental impacts associated with harvest management, hatchery practices, and habitat alteration will be required ...”

The resolution also committed to “continue to assist agencies and the public in the review and analysis of Snake River fisheries science and management” – thus this response.

As the resolution plainly states, we do not maintain breaching is “a panacea” (as the NMFS spokesman suggests). Breaching is necessary, but must be accompanied by action on habitat, harvest, and hatcheries. Unlike the Nov. 3 Oregonian article and the NMFS employees’ paper on which it reported, the draft NMFS Biological Opinion (BiOp) emphasizes substantive actions on these other “H’s.” We strongly applaud NMFS for its attention to these factors, but significant action on these H’s alone will not suffice.

The public is rightly skeptical of the suggestion that only “modest” improvements are needed – modest efforts have failed to restore wild Snake River salmon and steelhead. There are significant problems with the NMFS mathematical model and its application, but we think there are broader problems with NMFS position:

- (1) **If improving spawning habitat were the silver bullet, there would be healthy salmon populations where there is good habitat.** In reality, there are miles of excellent habitat in the Snake River basin without salmon. What's declined is not first-year survival, but survival after juvenile salmon negotiate the 8 dams standing between them and the ocean. That decline started when the dams went in and affects Snake River salmon more than salmon from the lower Columbia River (where salmon pass fewer dams) -- pointing to the hydrosystem as the most credible explanation. Since the dams went in, Snake River spring/summer chinook have very rarely returned in sufficient numbers to sustain the population.
- (2) **Restoration to fishable levels, not just avoiding extinction, is the appropriate goal.** Failure to restore Snake River salmon to sustainable, fishable levels fails to meet our Treaty Trust responsibilities or provide sustainable fishing for the public. Without substantial actions, soon, remaining endangered wild Snake River salmon will not be restored and may well go extinct – as Snake River coho salmon already have.
- (3) **The "modest decrease in mortality" the NMFS employees' paper says is required to avoid extinction translates to an increase in first-year survival beyond what is seen in wild salmon, even in prime wilderness habitats.** Ironically, the one action offered in that paper (but not reported in the Oregonian pieces) as one that might actually produce the desired improvements was -- dam breaching. They noted breaching would eliminate any delayed mortality from transportation, may increase the vigor of salmon and thus improve survival once below the last dams, and that if this improvement was sufficient “could reverse the declining trend” of these salmon.

A key remaining uncertainty is the sources of mortality Snake River fish experience after having passed all the dams. We believe they include not only elements of the natural ocean environment, but also delayed effects of earlier life-stage experiences – like passing 8 dams. Like a smoker who dies of lung cancer, it's not the last cigarette that did him in, but the effects of a lifetime of smoking.

As a large and diverse group of concerned scientists, we are clear on this: if the public wants these populations restored, restoration actions must include breaching – as well as significant action on habitat, hatchery, and harvest problems. Anyone still hoping that further minor tinkering will restore these dwindling populations is not listening to the evidence.

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