

Focusing on Dams is Missing the Point to Save Salmon

The Columbia and Snake river hydrosystems are important to all of us in the Northwest. They are the lifeblood of this region, yet the impact on hydropower benefits seems to be glossed over whenever the issue of salmon comes up.

Hydropower is the world's leading renewable energy resource. Its clean and affordable power is the backbone of a strong Northwest economy, supplying half of our electricity. It improves the air we breathe and reduces global warming by not polluting. Hydropower is also a perfect complement to the region's wind energy resource, because it can respond immediately to fluctuating energy demands. Hydropower is reliable, and by maintaining the flexibility of our hydrosystem it can remain one of the region's greatest natural resources.

Salmon recovery is an important aspect of dams. Dam operators have made enormous efforts and contributions by changing river operations and improving facilities to make improvements to the river system for salmon. Salmon survival at many dams has improved significantly, allowing almost all juvenile salmon to pass safely.

Salmon are a treasured symbol of the Northwest. The good news is they are not becoming extinct. Despite the gloom and doom messages heard about the health of our Northwest fish, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries' latest report shows all Endangered Species Act-listed salmon stocks have improved significantly since 2000. Snake River fall chinook increased by more than 300 percent during that four-year period. Even this year's mysterious run of spring chinook is significantly improved since the 1990s.

In our efforts to save salmon, we are missing the point by focusing on dams, when the evidence shows they are not the limiting factor. In fact, this year's strange spring chinook run tells us much of what is happening is taking place in the ocean where we can't see it, let alone control it. This includes runs from the rivers without dams. Juvenile salmon that migrate to the ocean do not all return to the rivers at the same time, but may stay at sea for 1, 2 or 3 years.

Because so many jacks—or early returns—came to the river last year, a strong forecast for this year's return was made in correlation. The fact that the number of fish we have seen is lower than expected tells us something happened to them between last year and this year—in the ocean, far away from the rivers.

Salmon recovery will require a close look at all of the "H"s: Hatcheries, Harvest, Habitat and, yes, Hydropower and the dams.

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