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## Editorial

January 29th, 2007

### **Editorial: PNWA Can't Buy American Rivers' Proposal**

According to the National Waterways Conference, Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) is planning to reintroduce his Salmon Planning Act, which would authorize two studies relating to the removal of four dams on the lower Snake River. However, the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association won't support the measure, saying "Neither study would address significant elements in salmon recovery such as the virtually unknown effects of ocean conditions on the listed stocks and the impact of harvesting these endangered species." Kristin Meira, PNWA spokeswoman, said the environmental group American Rivers authored the bill.

The first study would be conducted by the National Academy of Sciences and would review the effectiveness of the current federal salmon recovery program with the dams in place or removed. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) would conduct the second and would look into the effects of dam removal on transportation, irrigation and energy production, as well as the costs of species extinction and the cost of keeping the dams vs. breaching them.

Previous versions of McDermott's bill would have authorized studies related to breaching the four Lower Snake River dams and would have authorized breaching them. The latest draft no longer contains the authorization language. The draft bill identifies the need to study fully the feasibility and costs of moving freight from the river to rail or trucks instead.

Meira called that a difficult challenge, one that cannot be met given the stratospheric costs as well as the realities of the transportation and farming markets.

Needless to say, a good chunk of the Pacific Northwest economy is built around water transportation and the production of hydroelectric power. Authors of the bill did remove language that would authorize dam removal. And they would authorize a study of the costs of moving freight from the river to train or truck. But to ignore the effects of ocean conditions and the impact of harvesting salmon is a serious oversight.

Among the many reasons that salmon numbers are not where they were years ago is the cooler temperature of the Pacific Ocean. Climate changes have cooled ocean waters and played a role in an impressive comeback for many Columbia River salmon and steelhead stocks, according to a 2004 opinion piece in *The Seattle Times*. But it added that those changes couldn't be expected to last forever. The point of the piece was that while many local headlines had said Northwest salmon were staging a comeback, it was at that time not scientifically justifiable to reach that conclusion.

*The Seattle Times* piece said that most of the recovery at the time seemed to come from natural changes. And it said that returns of chinook in streams to the Puget Sound region from about 1999 to 2004 were not remarkable, still less than 10 percent of historical estimates. Notably, banner years for chinook were being noticed more in the Columbia River basin and the Sacramento River.

Obviously there is disagreement. PNWA reported recently that improvements at Bonneville Dam continue. On July 12, 2006, National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration fisheries scientists reported that survival of juvenile Snake River spring Chinook migrating from Lower Granite to Bonneville Dam was higher in 2006 than it had been since federal research began in 1993. And survival today is comparable or higher than that of the 1960s, when only four dams were built. We think those reports dealing with the Snake River are more important and, of course, now more timely.

Further, PNWA points out while several national and regional interest groups advocate breaching the four Snake River dams, "the region has made significant investments in improving the hydro system, and the investments

have worked." Adult salmon returns past Bonneville dam for each of the years 2001–2004 were the highest on record since counts began in 1938. Adult returns were down in 2005, yet, at over 1 million fish, they were the second-highest on record prior to the dramatic increase in 2001. The salmon returns over the past five years were the first-, second-, third-, fourth- and sixth-highest ever recorded past Bonneville Dam.

Well, there is no doubt that salmon populations are much less than they used to be. There is still much to learn. Obviously, we can't control climate and sea conditions. And we're not sure what the government is doing to control abuse by the salmon fisheries. What we can do is make our studies sensible and avoid doing something silly like breaching dams on the Snake River.

The proposed legislation just doesn't go far enough. There is a need to study ocean conditions and the impact of harvesting salmon. PNWA believes that the draft takes an extremely narrow view of salmon recovery in the Northwest and that conclusions drawn from such studies would have to be considered incomplete.



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