

Lower Snake River Dams in Jeopardy; Make Your Voice Heard!

By Kurt Miller

The region's clean and equitable energy future hangs in the balance of a federal process that will conclude this year, and you can influence the outcome.

A court-ordered analysis will help determine the future of the four lower Snake River dams. It is the first time in nearly 20 years that the federal government has examined the value these dams provide and the costs to society if they are breached.

The process is the Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement—or CRSO EIS. The draft report is expected to be released in or after February, 2020, and a 45-day public comment period will follow.

Why This Matters

Our region is facing a major challenge that many people aren't aware of. In their sincere effort to help fight the effects of climate change, Northwest electric utilities have announced plans for the retirement of thousands of megawatts of coal-fired generation throughout the next decade.

It takes roughly 1,000 megawatts to power a city the size of Seattle, so thousands of megawatts are a big deal.

Even with newly planned renewable generation, such as wind and solar, many Northwest energy experts are forecasting a high probability of regional blackouts.

Perhaps an even greater threat is the possibility of a repeat of the 2000-2001 Western Energy Crisis when utilities had to compete for scarce energy supply. That historic event resulted in the loss of thousands of living-wage jobs in the Northwest and huge, prolonged spikes in electricity bills.

Given the region's affordable housing shortage, an electricity price spike is something we cannot let happen again.



There are real human consequences. Our most vulnerable communities can least afford a price hike. They could be forced out of their homes, adding to the region's already widespread homelessness crisis.

Amid this uncertain future, the federal government is seeking your feedback about the future of the four lower Snake River dams.

The truth is we need the hydroelectricity from these dams to prevent regional blackouts and to help fight the climate crisis. The four lower Snake River dams provide an average of 1,000 MW of carbon-free electricity and at times can produce as much as 3,000 MW.

The dams' ability to store water and release it past turbines to generate electricity when needed is also critical. Wind and solar power are intermittent resources. This means they can fluctuate greatly on a minute-to-minute basis, based on wind, cloud cover and sunshine. However, the grid must have a perfect balance of supply and demand every second, or blackouts can occur. The

lower Snake River dams help provide that balance to keep the grid safe.

What About Salmon?

Lisa Crozier, a scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, was recently quoted as saying scientists worldwide are seeing "almost synchronous declines in salmon populations." This finding tells us the challenges salmon face may not be related to dams after all.

People are becoming more aware of the connection between the ocean warming and reduced salmon survival. As a matter of fact, many of the concerns people often attribute to dams, such as poor adult salmon returns, can be easily traced to worsening ocean conditions.

Most scientists agree our oceans are degrading at an alarming rate due to higher levels of carbon causing acidification and warming. At the same time, increases in pollution and waste are poisoning marine life. The result is critical prey for salmon are becoming scarce, and the marine ecosystems—where Chinook

salmon spend 75% of their lives—are extremely out of balance.

There's simply no way around it. For salmon to thrive, the state of the oceans must improve. To do that, we need to be adding carbon-free resources, not removing them.

Whether your concerns are about blackouts, energy prices or climate change, it's important to recognize the role the lower Snake River dams play in our grid and our transition to carbon-free energy.

How You Can Help

With so much uncertainty surrounding the topic, perhaps what is most clear is that opinions about the lower Snake River dams are heartfelt on both sides.

In the stakeholder report ordered by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, the consultants noted the topic is incredibly divisive and there is a need for more respect and understanding between both sides.

We acknowledge there are dedicated groups who sincerely believe the dams do more harm than good, particularly when it comes to salmon and orcas. Although the science on whether dams actually cause such harm or not is very mixed, and dam-breaching proponents have been effective in rallying support for their cause.

Things will be no different when the public comment period on the draft EIS opens.

Now more than ever, it is critical that voices of support for the Lower Snake River dams are heard as well. Your input during the public comment period matters

now more than ever, and your action—or lack thereof—could greatly influence the future of our region.

By writing to the federal agencies, you will help them understand the importance of the lower Snake River dams and ensure we can achieve a clean and equitable future.

This is your opportunity to make a difference!

Details

The draft EIS should be released in February or shortly after.

Look for details on the CRSO EIS at www.nwd.usace.army.mil/CRSO/.

The best way to keep informed is to submit your email address to info@crso.info and ask to be added to the notifications list.

If you don't have access to email, you can ask for physical notifications by sending your name and address to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Attn: CRSO EIS
P.O. Box 2870
Portland, OR 97208-2870

After doing so, you should receive further information on the release of the draft CRSO EIS and how to provide input, either in public forums or in writing.

We encourage you to also follow Northwest RiverPartners on social media @nriverpartners and visit www.nriverpartners.org. ■

Kurt Miller is the executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. This article first ran in the February 2020 NWPPA Bulletin.



Snake River sockeye. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION

When sharing your views on the importance of the lower Snake River dams, please consider including:

- ▶ A recent pro-breaching report from ECONorthwest admits there is “extreme uncertainty” around the benefits to salmon of breaching the lower Snake River dams. Due to improvements at these dams, the survival rate for juvenile fish is comparable to that of a free-flowing river. The science on the true benefits of breaching is highly contested.
- ▶ The Northwest is facing the threat of energy shortages, even with the dams in place. In California, recurring blackouts are already creating a two-class electric system, where the price of installing alternative energy systems and backup generators is still cost-prohibitive for lower income residents.
- ▶ Our most vulnerable communities cannot afford a repeat of the 2000-2001 Western Energy Crisis, which caused the loss of thousands of living-wage jobs and huge increases in electricity bills. A repeat could push many low-income communities over the brink.
- ▶ Scientists have noted an almost synchronous declines in worldwide salmon populations, likely tied to worsening ocean conditions caused by climate change.
- ▶ To help salmon, we need to keep our existing carbon-free resources and add renewables to the grid, such as wind and solar. Hydroelectricity is essential to accomplishing that goal.
- ▶ With more wind and solar power coming online, hydroelectricity has become even more critical, because dams store water and release it past turbines to generate electricity when needed. The storage and release of water can be matched perfectly with wind and solar energy to safely balance the grid.
- ▶ Breaching is bad for farmers, farm workers and food. Much of the food produced in the Northwest comes from the eastern parts of the region. The lower Snake River dams provide important irrigation and the ability to barge food to downstream ports. Breaching the dams would harm farm workers and reduce the region's food supply.