

"Notes by Resource Writers. Supplements may be provided."

**Regional Executives Conference Call on System Operations
Friday, April 6, 2001
Part 1, Federal Only; Part 2, With States and Tribes**

The regional executives held a conference call Friday, April 6, 2001, from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. to discuss system operations under this spring's low water conditions.

Greg Delwiche of BPA outlined an agenda, including Vernita Bar operations and the status of the draft operations plan. Brian Brown of NMFS suggested the executives talk about their response to a letter from Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber, and Eric Mogren of the Corps of Engineers said the Corps also received a letter from Antone Minthorn of the Umatilla Tribes supporting the Vernita Bar Agreement operation. A Bureau of Reclamation participant said Grand Coulee operations should also be on the agenda.

1. Vernita Bar. During the last week in March, we had a rise in flows on the Snake to 40 to 45 kcfs, which raised system flows enough to put BPA in surplus, Delwiche reported. The Snake River flows have backed off now, so we are in load/resource balance, he said. The results are that the Vernita Bar flow is at the protection level of 65 kcfs, and we see these conditions persisting into next week, Delwiche continued. We don't see a need to grapple with the question of backing off Grand Coulee right now; if you back Coulee off, there are impacts to fish, and there is the question of how much water you can store for later, he stated. It's a hard question to answer, Delwiche added. He proposed managing the situation week-to-week, keeping Vernita Bar flow at 65 kcfs for now.

There is an assumption that if we save water now, there is no guarantee there won't be a power emergency that will use it all up, Mogren said. If you save water in Grand Coulee instead of using it for Vernita Bar flows, why assume it would be used for power instead of spill or some other fish operation later on? he asked. Any water saved if flows are pulled back could be earmarked for ESA operations, Mogren suggested.

If we have no other remedy in a power emergency, we would use water from somewhere in the system to generate, and we'd end up in the same place, Delwiche responded. Why can't you say if there is an emergency later, you will go somewhere else for the power? Mogren asked. It would be an ESA-driven action, he added. So you're suggesting we would put the water into an account and commit to using it for fish operations in the future, Delwiche clarified.

We think our loads will require us to operate within the Vernita Bar protection range next week anyway, Therese Lamb of BPA stated. But if your loads change? Mogren asked. Greg is suggesting we should manage week-to-week, Lamb responded. We need to consider our Treaty responsibilities, Mogren stated. The tribes are interested in fish other

than ESA-listed fish, and the Treaty/Trust issue is the reason to go with the Vernita Bar operation, he said. We have not included that responsibility in our principles and priorities, Mogren pointed out. It's now in the revised principles and priorities, both in the introduction and in the fish operations priorities as a Vernita Bar flows versus Grand Coulee refill issue, Lamb responded. Right now the loads are such that if you run the system for loads, you protect Vernita Bar, she reiterated.

So you are asking, if later this month we can back off the flows, could BPA make a commitment "to color-code the water" and spill it later? Delwiche inquired. Steve Wright said at the March 30 meeting that he could not do that, and I want to explore the question, Mogren responded. If there is an emergency, we can't make an upfront commitment not to use the water to generate, Delwiche responded.

I think there is some balancing to consider with the tribal Trust responsibility, Carolyn Whitney of BPA stated. The UCUTs would argue that we need to protect gravesites and fish at Grand Coulee, she pointed out. Is there an analysis of the impacts of the Vernita Bar operation on Grand Coulee? Mogren asked. There is no explicit study, but nutrient retention time is the metric used to measure the impacts on fish that result from drafting the reservoirs, Jim Ruff of NMFS responded. There are standards in the Council's fish and wildlife program about the retention time, he said. Retention time was translated into the biological rule curves, Delwiche said. I'd think we are below those curves, he added.

We have the opportunity to protect the Vernita Bar salmon through the end of April, Jim Fodrea of the Bureau of Reclamation said. The data from BPA says there will not be much opportunity to store significant water in Grand Coulee over that period, so why not get on the table to provide 65 kcfs at Vernita Bar and protect the fish, he suggested. What is the emergence date for those fish? a participant asked. May 5, Ruff said. But don't you have 85 to 90 percent by the end of April? Fodrea asked.

Generally speaking, I'd agree, Delwiche said. But there are wild cards that may occur; for example, if flows pick up in the Snake, we could have significant opportunity to put water in Coulee, he pointed out. Then we would reduce the protection level, but no one is looking for significant rises on the Snake, Fodrea responded. We are down to two or three weeks until the end of April, and the most we could put in Coulee if we reduce the protection level is a couple of feet a week, he said. Protecting Vernita Bar would put us in good shape with the trust responsibility and the TMT wouldn't have to decide this every week, Fodrea pointed out.

"I agree with your logic," Delwiche said. I'm comfortable with the decision, but with the caveat we could revisit it if significant change occurs, he stated. Donna Darm of NMFS cautioned against characterizing the opportunity to put a couple of feet a week into Grand Coulee as insignificant. "We are touting the load buyback as a big deal," and it's less water than that, she said.

Do we want to commit to 65 kcfs if the protection level is less than that? Mogren asked. I'd say commit to 65 kcfs, Fodrea advised. The protection level is 65 kcfs if you are

going to protect all redds, Lamb pointed out. The Vernita Bar Agreement offers the opportunity to reduce flows to 57 kcfs in a low water year, she said. The estimate is 20 to 25 percent of the redds would be lost if you drop to 57 kcfs, Lamb said.

What could happen to cause us to reverse this decision? Mogren asked. We always have the flexibility to change operations, Darm stated. If we say the plan is to meet 65 kcfs, we would call a meeting of the principals if we decide to change it, she said. What if we get a call for Spring Creek spill? Mogren asked. We don't anticipate a call for Spring Creek spill – we'll call for spill only for listed fish, Bill Shake of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated. Greg has mentioned a pickup in Snake River flows or a warm snap as possible changes that would cause us to revisit our decision, Darm said.

So our decision is to commit to 65 kcfs through April 30, and if conditions change, we will revisit the issue and call a meeting of the principals, Delwiche summed up. Let's characterize this as the operational plan, Darm suggested. Which principals are you referring to? Bill Kinsey of BPA asked. The principals to the Vernita Bar Agreement, Delwiche responded. Such a meeting could be on short notice, he added.

2. Responses to Tribal Letters. Kinsey reported he is drafting a response to a letter from CRITFC. Our thinking is that a coordinated federal response would be desirable, he said, adding he would send out the draft for review. In the letter, we encourage CRITFC to participate in the process we set up, and I have referred to meetings the Corps has set up later this month as another opportunity for discussions, Kinsey explained.

CRITFC wants to talk about keeping pool levels up during the fishing season, Mogren said. We have historically committed to holding the Bonneville pool flat, but it is harder to commit on the other projects, he said. This is an annual discussion we have, and we will be meeting with CRITFC next week, Mogren clarified. We don't object to including other agencies in the meetings if they have issues they want to discuss, he added. It's an attractive opportunity to show a willingness to talk about issues, Kinsey responded.

We have a request from CRITFC for consultation, but they are not a tribe, Whitney pointed out. We have set up the process they asked us for, and if we have separate consultation with them, it will erode the process we have established with the Friday meetings, she said. I'm suggesting we not have separate consultation with any one group on operations, Whitney stated. We could use our response to the letter "to point out delicately" that we have brought the tribes into our Friday process and that is the place to discuss operations, Delwiche suggested. Kinsey said he would revise his draft letter based on the discussion.

3. Grand Coulee Operations. We are concerned about refill levels at Grand Coulee, and we're worried about being able to serve irrigators without affecting the levels at Banks Lake, Fodrea said. We assume even in a bad year we will get to elevation 1,280 feet, but we have concerns about that this year, he continued. We are just raising this flag; we may want to look at some specific levels at Lake Roosevelt, Fodrea stated.

Sounds like we should build that into our operations plan, Delwiche said. Yes, and look at our other options, including the WNP-2 maintenance schedule, Fodrea agreed.

4. Operations Plan. All agencies have a draft outline and calendar for the plan, Lamb reported. We'd like your feedback, she said, adding that the technical staff will be meeting Tuesday at 1 p.m. to work on the plan.

We see this as a very important document that will be widely circulated, Delwiche stated. The logic needs to be well supported – we need to lay out what we want to do with the supporting documentation, he said.

I want to fully understand the spill component of the plan, Mike White of the Corps stated. "It's by far the most critical thing," he commented.

We'll lay out spill within the parameters set up in the principles, Delwiche responded. There will be a decision-tree approach, he said. We will not advocate taking spill off the table, but we will lay it out as one of the decisions, according to Delwiche. If we find we are outside the financial and reliability criteria, we don't see spill occurring, but if we are within the criteria, it is an option, he explained.

5. Kitzhaber Letter. Brown said the Kitzhaber letter makes two recommendations: assure that the maximum possible volume of water is used for instream purposes; and dedicate a portion of the power revenues available due to spill reduction for use in mitigation for fish and wildlife impacts.

Delwiche said he would like Steve Wright to be present to discuss a response to the letter. Fodrea and Shake said they had not seen the Kitzhaber letter. Is there a commitment to a block of funding? Brown asked. We will commit to considering mitigation, but we have not said it will be a block of money, Delwiche responded.

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At 9 a.m., the regional executives added tribal and state participants to the call. The primary agenda item is Vernita Bar, Mogren stated.

Our proposed operating plan is that the river will be managed to 65 kcfs at Vernita Bar through the end of April, Delwiche stated. But if unforeseen circumstances occur, we will call a meeting of the Vernita Bar principals to discuss them, he said.

Sounds good to me, Rob Lothrop of CRITFC stated. Sounds fine, Carl Merkel of the Umatilla Tribes agreed. If any of the circumstances occur, could we have the proposals in writing? he asked. Our chairman sent you a letter about the need to protect Vernita Bar, Merkel added. We need any proposed changes to operations in writing, he reiterated.

We can commit to that, Delwiche said. A possible change in circumstance would be if we have an early runoff in the Snake and the flows go up to 60 or 70 kcfs, he said. In that case, Grand Coulee could be backed off to store water, and it would be worth a discussion, Delwiche explained. We don't see that happening, though, since the forecast is for cool weather out to mid April, he added. A warm temperature snap is another condition that could call for a discussion, but we don't see that happening either, Delwiche summed up.

We have a 10:30 a.m. call with the Vernita Bar parties, and we will give them the same message, Lamb said. Tim Weaver, an attorney for the Yakama Indian Nation, joined the call and asked what had happened. Delwiche repeated the earlier proposal, including the caveat for calling a meeting if circumstances change and offering any proposed changes to operations in writing. Sounds fair to me, Weaver stated.

The call concluded at 10: 15 a.m.

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