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**Federal government announces approach to
court order on salmon plan**

The federal government today said it will work with the region's tribes and states to respond to Judge James Redden's order to bolster the habitat actions in the federal plan to restore Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead, known as a biological opinion, under the Endangered Species Act.

"We will be using the same collaboration approach we used with the existing biological opinion," said Will Stelle, regional director of NOAA Fisheries. "We will work issues through the regional workgroup of states and tribes that has been overseeing the implementation and share information with all the parties. The Judge's order directed us to work with the sovereigns."

The federal agencies outlined their position in a brief filed today with Judge Redden in the U.S. District Court of Oregon. The Department of Justice brief responded to plaintiffs' comments on the 2010 annual progress report on implementation of actions to mitigate for the harm to ESA-listed fish resulting from the operation of the federal hydropower dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

"As our progress report shows, improvements to the dams have resulted in 95-99 percent per-dam survival rate for juvenile spring chinook and steelhead," said Dave Ponganis, director of programs for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "The report also shows how our state and tribal partners are restoring streamside habitat, removing barriers to open up new tributary and estuary habitat, and putting water back in streams. As a result, salmon are coming back to places they haven't been seen for decades."

"This is important work, and we have made it our highest priority," said Ponganis. "We will maintain a focus on implementation in the next two years as we work with local experts to respond to the court's order."

The court remanded the biological opinion to the agencies to identify specific habitat restoration projects to be undertaken in 2013 through 2018 and evaluate their biological benefits to salmon. The Corps, Bonneville Power Administration, and the Bureau of Reclamation – known as the action agencies – are working with several watershed and expert-panel groups throughout the Columbia River Basin and in the Columbia estuary to identify those projects.

"While the court's order directs us to focus on habitat, the action agencies will continue to implement and adapt measures for dam operations and improvements, predator management and hatchery improvements," said Stelle. "As the biological opinion calls for, they are addressing all the factors that affect fish survival."

The agencies noted that independent science reviews conducted by the Obama Administration and others have established that the federal plan is based on sound science. In keeping with this, the habitat projects that are specified during the remand will be supported by independently developed scientific and technical information that will document their benefits to fish.

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