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Federal agencies propose more efficient summer spill program for salmon

PORTLAND, Ore. – In response to regional calls for alternative summer spill operations for fish, the Bonneville Power Administration and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers today released a proposed three-year pilot plan to adjust spill at certain dams while stepping up measures to protect salmon and steelhead. The proposal developed following an extensive five-month regional review of alternatives, seeks to maintain biological benefits for salmon while reducing overall program costs.

Spill would be reduced primarily during August when few fish benefiting from spill are present in the river. The plan is expected to produce a savings of \$35 to \$45 million annually. The plan includes elements to provide biologically sound mitigation for salmon and steelhead listed under the Endangered Species Act and to maintain protection for nonlisted juvenile salmon.

There is significant interest in summer spill alternatives from the four Northwest governors, the congressional delegation, regional stakeholders and others. The proposal also comes as regional fish managers are predicting another near-record year of salmon returns in many areas of the Pacific Northwest and following record numbers of fall chinook salmon returns last fall past Bonneville Dam.

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Spill is one component of a large program of actions under a federal Columbia Basin fish recovery strategy. Currently, water is spilled as one of several means to help juvenile fish safely migrate past the dams. Water that might otherwise go through turbines to produce power is routed over the spillway instead, carrying fish with it. Juvenile fish also pass by way of fish bypass systems built into the dams, and many are successfully barged downriver under a federal juvenile fish transport program.

The proposed summer spill pilot program would test predictions that alternatives to the current spill program can achieve similar or better biological benefits for fish at less cost. The plan contains modifications to the current spill program, including reduced spill operations at Ice Harbor Dam during the last half of July; ending spill during August at Ice Harbor, John Day, The Dalles and Bonneville dams; maintaining current spill operations at The Dalles Dam in July; and adjusting spill at John Day Dam in July to improve fish survival.

The federal agencies' proposal includes two actions to offset reductions in summer spill:

- Increased control of northern pikeminnow, a species of predatory fish that feed in summer months largely on juvenile salmon in the Columbia and Snake rivers.
- Adjusting operations to protect juvenile mid-Columbia fall chinook from stranding.

These actions alone will not make up for the effects of the spill change. Therefore, the agencies also are soliciting comments on the following actions to allow the agencies to choose the best combination for fish benefit:

- Improvements and enhancements of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council's Fish & Wildlife Program.
- Implementation of additional cost-effective mitigation actions under consideration, including additional tribal harvest enforcement funding, increased or improved hatchery supplementation for certain affected stocks, increased control of Caspian tern and cormorant predators, and other habitat measures.

An amended proposal will be developed once comments are in.

The plan also would integrate ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities to determine the effectiveness of implementation of other plan proposals, including radio telemetry and hydroacoustic monitoring, PIT-tagging (Passive Integration Transformer) studies, annual reporting of northern pikeminnow control and other activities.

"We want fish in our rivers and low-cost electric power," Steve Wright, BPA administrator said. "We're going to do the same or better at saving fish and contributing to fish recovery -- and at saving money. We believe this proposal responds to the public's desire for government to continuously seek the most efficient operations possible while accomplishing the region's environmental objectives."

"The federal agencies take very seriously their responsibility to manage public resources wisely," said Brigadier General William Grisoli, commander of the Northwestern Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "To be responsive to the region, we are finding ways to protect fish while taking into account the power users' needs. We also remain committed to treaty and trust responsibilities to Columbia River Basin tribes."

BPA and the Corps are coordinating with NOAA Fisheries in this process. "We are interested in ensuring that reductions in summer spill will be matched with equivalent biological benefit for salmon with greater efficiency," said Bob Lohn, Northwest regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "We look forward to working with our regional counterparts to achieve those goals."

In addition, the Corps recently completed state-of-the-art technological and structural improvements to the Lower Granite and Bonneville dams and has planned future projects that are expected to improve juvenile fish passage and survival past the dams. The Bush Administration also announced the increase of an additional \$10 million in its FY 2005 budget request for the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, which provides funding to hundreds of salmon habitat restoration and protection projects to Northwest states and tribes.

The three federal agencies are seeking written comments on their proposal through April 7, 2004. Specifically, comments are sought on the plan's proposed spill operation modifications, the proposed offsets and which other offsets warrant inclusion in the final decision. A final decision is anticipated about two weeks later.

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