

Lincoln County Montana

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RITA R. WINDOM, Commissioner DISTRICT NO. 1, LIBBY

TESTIMONY OF RITA R. WINDOM

Lincoln County Commissioner

March 1, 2000

National Marine Fisheries Service Public Hearing on Columbia River Operation and Upcoming Biological Opinion

Outlaw Inn, Kalispell, Montana 6 p.m.

The Kootenai River has two fish species listed under the Endangered Species Act: the endangered Kootenai white sturgeon and the threatened bull trout. Possibly that list will soon include westslope cutthroat and burbot which have been petitioned for listing. Libby Dam is the only federal project that can be operated to benefit these species in the Kootenai, yet these fish have effectively been relegated to a lower status than the listed anadromous species. This is now the time to fully consider the needs of the species in the Kootenai River watershed. We in Lincoln County have repeatedly testified in favor of a balanced operation that benefits all Columbia River fish, while maintaining local recreation, flood control and power production, i.e. the congressionally authorized project purposes. To this end, we want the federal agencies to implement the Integrated Rule Curves, or IRCs, and sturgeon tiered flow approach developed by Montana, and the variable flow, or VARQ, strategy for system flood control developed by the Army Corps of Engineers.

This combination of dam operating strategies provides the flexibility to keep Libby Dam elevations higher than the IRCs when it is safe in terms of flood control, and affords a more natural annual flow pattern in the Kootenai River. Specifically, VARQ will enable dam operators to hold more reservoir water during average and dryer years, so that spring flows can be augmented for sturgeon and salmon without impacting reservoir refill. Also, the reservoir will refill in more years due to the IRC/VARQ operation,

benefiting the reservoir and increasing the number of years in which water is available for summer flow augmentation. We can be good neighbors by releasing reservoir storage from the top ten feet from full pool to enhance the river downstream and salmon recovery. Drafting more than ten feet is harmful to the reservoir and the river. Just be sure that the release of reservoir storage is gradual during late summer and fall, so that the river remains at a constant, albeit higher flow. Unnatural river fluctuations are especially harmful to the fish, and recreation, in the Kootenai River during summer and fall. This operating strategy is sustainable from year to year and places the listed Kootenai River fish on an equal footing with the listed species in the lower reaches of the Columbia Watershed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rita R. Windom". The signature is fluid and connected, with the first name "Rita" being the most prominent.

Rita R. Windom

Lincoln County Commissioner