

**FEDERAL AGENCIES
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Federal agencies tout advancing salmon recovery efforts, results

***'Disappointed' with court's ruling regarding federal dam operations,
will explore next legal steps***

PORTLAND, Ore. -

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While expressing disappointment with a federal court ruling today regarding a biological opinion on operation of the federal Columbia and Snake river hydropower system, the heads of the federal agencies in charge of the dams reiterated a continued commitment to move forward with regional salmon recovery efforts and to build upon several years of improvement experienced by most of the Northwest's salmon runs. Federal officials also indicated an intention to explore all options with their legal advisors regarding the court's ruling.

The ruling by the U.S. District Court in Portland pertains to the biological opinion (BiOp) released in late 2004 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) relating to the federal dams. The BiOp reviews a set of actions proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bonneville Power Administration to aid Columbia Basin salmon. Among other things, these actions include installing state-of-the-art "fish slides" for young salmon traveling through dams, restoring habitat and controlling fish-eating predators.

The federal agencies are spending approximately \$6 billion over 10 years on salmon efforts in the Columbia/Snake river basin -- the most significant program for Columbia and Snake river salmon ever.

"Our efforts to protect salmon are yielding measurable improvements, and we are hard at work on recovery plans," said Bob Lohn, Northwest regional director of NOAA Fisheries. "Together, Northwest stakeholders have helped to restore over 3,000 miles of salmon habitat and are producing locally driven recovery plans for the entire Northwest," he said. NOAA Fisheries, with local, tribal and state support, recently released a draft recovery plan for three Columbia/Snake river species in the lower Columbia River in Washington listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Similar recovery plans for all other regions of the Columbia and Snake River basins are expected to be delivered to NOAA Fisheries by the end of 2005 and incorporated into final recovery plans by the end of 2006. These areas would include plans for recovering the other nine ESA-listed Columbia/Snake River stocks in the Snake River Basin and the upper and mid-Columbia River, as well as along the Puget Sound and Oregon Coast

While this ruling will not immediately change federal hydro operations, environmental groups, Indian tribes and others have filed a separate suit in the same court seeking a change in current hydro operations at four lower Snake River dams and four dams on the Columbia River, and calling for more spill and reduced travel time for salmon smolts in the rivers this summer. This request, if granted, would have immediate consequences on the region, said federal officials. The U.S. District Court set a hearing for June 10 in Portland.

"If the plaintiffs' motion were granted by the court, we expect the cost of this year's operation for our system would go up over \$100 million," said BPA Administrator Steve Wright. "These additional costs would have to be borne by Northwest ratepayers."

The operations being sought by the plaintiffs will have additional adverse impacts on the regional economy. For the federal agencies "statements of record" on regional impacts of the plaintiffs' proposal, see "Summary of key regional impacts" at: www.salmonrecovery.gov.

This year's operating plan already includes full spill this spring and summer at all four lower Columbia River dams and Ice Harbor Dam on the Snake River. This spill helps all stocks originating from above Bonneville Dam. On the Snake River, juvenile fish will be collected and transported to a release point below Bonneville Dam. This procedure ensures optimal survival in periods of low water for the four listed species on the Snake River, federal biologists say.

"To choose an untried operation during a low-water year such as this would be risky and speculative for salmon survival," said Lohn. "The region cannot afford to depart from sound science in protecting these species at risk."

"We remain committed to implementing the numerous beneficial actions proposed in this biological opinion while we work out the legal issues," said Bill McDonald, Pacific Northwest regional director for the Bureau of Reclamation.

"We are fully committed to complying with the court ruling while working with our partners to protect salmon and minimize impacts to flood control, hydropower and navigation operations during this period of uncertainty," said Brig. Gen. William T. Grisoli, commander of the Corps' Northwestern Division. "The region must not lose sight of the positive actions proposed in the biological opinion and our long-term recovery effort."

A map showing the Northwest recovery plan areas can be found at http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/1srd/Recovery/domains/willow/WMU_Plan/Map_status-of-plans.jpg.

A detailed summary of the federal budget for Columbia Basin salmon activities over the past five years and the proposed budget for FY 2006 can be found at

http://www.salmonrecovery.gov/Implementation/FY_06_SALMON_CROSS_CUT.pdf.

Updated statistics for salmon and steelhead returns through 2004 are at http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/1srd/Recovery/domains/willow/WMU_Plan/SalmonReturns.pdf.

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