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**By Doc Hastings and Peter DeFazio**

What if a regional salmon plan was supported by three Northwest governors, six Indian tribes and the Obama administration? What if the plan had undergone rigorous review by some of the most respected scientists in the nation, who all agreed it was a sound plan well grounded in the best science? And what if it had bipartisan support across a wide spectrum of the Northwest's diverse political interests?

Well, there is such a plan. It's called a biological opinion for the operation of the Columbia River's economically vital federal hydroelectric system. And the plan is being aggressively implemented by four federal agencies in the Northwest with the active support of most of the region's states and tribes.

But there are some who disagree. And their disagreements are prolonging a court case that has ground on for more than a decade. The ongoing litigation is creating uncertainty for the region that will have short- and long-term consequences for salmon, Northwest ratepayers and the hydroelectric system. Instead of working to implement a comprehensive, peer-reviewed, broadly agreed-upon solution, we are spending precious federal resources in the courtroom.

The plaintiffs in this case argue that Columbia Basin salmon are on the verge of extinction. They argue that the federal plan does little to address the threats to these fish. Let's look at the facts.

Salmon returns to the Columbia Basin have been trending upward for the last 20 years. Today we're witnessing record-breaking runs. Preliminary estimates indicate that more than 10,000 wild Snake River fall chinook salmon returned in 2010 -- about twice the previous recent record set in 2001. Compare that to only 78 wild adults that returned in 1990, two years before these fish were listed under the Endangered Species Act. But that's hardly the end of the story. Snake River spring and summer chinook returns in the last 10 years are more than three times the average seen during the 1990s. And Snake River sockeye -- which were almost entirely wiped out before construction began on the federal dams in the Snake River -- are enjoying a comeback. Unlike 1992 when "Lonesome Larry" migrated alone to Idaho's Redfish Lake, last year's sockeye run was the largest since the mid-1950s.

Further monitoring is needed -- and required by the federal salmon plan -- before we can declare victory. But current trends are headed in the right direction, and full implementation of the plan will further improve salmon runs.

The federal salmon plan is surely one of the most ambitious and extensive fish and wildlife mitigation plans in the world today. Federal agencies -- and Northwest ratepayers -- have invested nearly \$1 billion in salmon-friendly dam modifications since 2000. Huge volumes of water are spilled at dams during the juvenile salmon migration periods. This spill comes at great cost -- both in terms of dollars lost and lost renewable energy. And bear in mind that the clean energy lost due to salmon spill is largely replaced by fossil-fueled generation, a major source of greenhouse gases.

Dam improvements have made a difference for Columbia River salmon. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's own 2010 supplemental biological opinion, dam improvements made over the last decade mean that young salmon migrating to the ocean through the Columbia power system survive at a rate equal to the rate seen in rivers with no dams.

But the federal salmon plan is not limited to improvements at the dams. The federal agencies, led by the Bonneville Power Administration, are implementing an extensive and ambitious plan to restore habitat in the tributaries of the Columbia and Snake rivers where salmon spawn and their young mature. The Columbia estuary, an important way station for migrating salmon, is also receiving investment and added protections. In addition, federal agencies are pursuing a range of measures to control the predation that kills thousands of adult and juvenile salmon every year. These efforts come at a cost to BPA's ratepayers of tens of millions of dollars a year. But they result in improved salmon survival and increasing adult salmon returns.

The independent scientists consulted by the Obama administration confirmed that the federal salmon plan relies on the best available science and will likely lead to improved salmon abundance. They also recommended some modest improvements to better protect against unexpected downturns in future salmon returns.

It's time to move out of Judge James Redden's courtroom and toward full implementation of the federal salmon plan. We recognize that it's not perfect, and a lot of hard work remains. But for the sake of the fish and people, it's time this plan is executed.

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