

Regional tribes oppose plan to save wild salmon

By James Hagengruber
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Water spill could damage graves, stir up mining sediments, they say

In a twist to the usual argument of electricity production vs. the environment, Inland Northwest tribes are opposing a salmon-saving proposal that calls for spilling more water down the Columbia River.

Although the Colville, Spokane, and Kootenai tribes once depended on wild salmon, the tribes worry that saving the fish in the modern era of dams could result in problems, including ancestral grave desecration and the stirring of toxic mining sediments on the bottom of reservoirs.

On Thursday, U.S. District Judge James A. Redden heard arguments in his Portland courtroom over the merits of sending more water downstream to help imperiled salmon. Tribes from the Upper Columbia River basin found themselves on the same side as the federal government and hydroelectric dam operators as they opposed additional water being flushed downstream to boost the survival of young salmon heading toward the sea. But tribal officials bristled at the notion they are turning their backs on the fish.

"We know how important those fish are," said Warren Seyler, vice chairman of the Spokane Tribe of Indians. "The Spokane Tribe fully supports saving the salmon. What we are asking is that our other issues have full consideration."

Judge Redden is expected to issue a ruling by the end of the year on the timing and amount of water to be sent downstream in 2006.

Seyler estimates that salmon made up about 80 percent of his ancestors' diet, but the fish have been separated from the tribe since construction of Grand Coulee Dam in the 1930s. Water impounded by the dam in Lake Roosevelt now covers countless cultural sites and graves. When Lake Roosevelt's water is sent downstream, those graves and sites are exposed to artifact hunters. When the graves are underwater, the bones and artifacts remain undisturbed, Seyler explained.

"The graves are protected by inundation," he said. "If you remove that protection, you have pot hunters and people digging up our graves."

Efforts by the tribe and state to build a sport fishery in Lake Roosevelt are also threatened by the water spills, said Seyler, who also serves as the chairman of the Upper Columbia United Tribes. "We put 2 million fish into that lake every year. If you flush to that great of an extent, with that flush goes the fish, with that flush goes the nutrients."

Environmental and fishing groups fighting for more water downstream acknowledge the awkwardness of trying to save fish at a potential cost to damaging sacred sites.

"It's really a sensitive issue, obviously," said James Schroeder, an environmental policy analyst with the National Wildlife Federation's Seattle office. But Schroeder said extra water spilled last summer boosted survival of fall Chinook by 64 percent.

The situation could be defused if the federal government purchased or negotiated for additional water from large reservoirs farther upstream in Canada, said Todd True, an attorney for Earthjustice who represents environmental and fishing groups in the case.

"We think there's a way to sort this out," True said, speaking from his office in Seattle. "We still think there is a middle ground there."

Judge Redden has ordered the federal agencies, tribes and states to work together to develop a new Columbia River management plan over the next year, but it's unclear if any plan will be capable of meeting the goals of all groups.

Last summer's court-ordered spill came at a cost of \$75 million in lost power generation potential, according to estimates from the Bonneville Power Administration. Environmentalists and anglers say even more water should be diverted around turbines to help speed the journey of young salmon to the Pacific.

The extra water boosts the chances the smolt will survive the gantlet of predators, including hungry seagulls and pike minnows, said Sam Mace, Inland Northwest project director for Save Our Wild Salmon.