

ARTICLE PUBLISHED JAN 27, 2006

Salmon decision enrages opponents: Two new groups to take over crucial counting of fish

PORTLAND — The Bonneville Power Administration said Thursday that two new organizations will take responsibility for counting salmon passing over dams in the Columbia Basin, drawing outrage from Indian tribes, fishermen and conservationists unhappy that the Fish Passage Center was sacked.

The move followed action by Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, who was critical of a Fish Passage Center report cited by a federal judge in ordering more water spilled over federal hydroelectric dams to help salmon.

Craig inserted language in an appropriations bill directing BPA to find someone new to count salmon. Spilling water over the dams leaves less to go through turbines to generate electricity.

"BPA strongly supports the principle of clear separation between data collection and management, scientific analysis and coordination of policy," said Greg Delwiche, BPA's vice president for environment, fish and wildlife. He said the new organizations "will enhance the independence and neutrality of the scientific analysis in both fact and appearance."

Created in 1984, the Fish Passage Center has 11 employees and gets \$1.3 million a year from BPA, which markets power produced by the dams. The funding is provided under the Northwest Power Act, which requires some of the profits from dam operations to be used to overcome damages to fish and wildlife caused by the dams. Representatives of Indian tribes and sport and commercial fishermen on the Columbia River roundly criticized the move, saying it could reduce the reliability of data that have been essential in reducing the harm dams cause salmon.

"For the past 20 years the Fish Passage Center has provided the Northwest with reliable data in a timely manner. Today's decision is the result of a terribly flawed process that started from a false, predetermined conclusion — that the Fish Passage Center needed to be replaced," said Rebecca Miles, chairwoman of the Nez Perce Tribe.

The Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission will monitor juvenile salmon headed downstream to the ocean, collect data from counters that keep track of fish, and compile the information. Created by Congress, the Portland-based commission provides help in managing ocean fisheries to government agencies and the fishing industry.

Battelle Pacific Northwest Laboratory will analyze the data and arrange for peer review of the analysis. Battelle has operated the U.S. Energy Department's Pacific Northwest Laboratory in Richland, Wash., since 1965. The change takes place March 21.

Meanwhile, fish conservation and sport fishing groups have filed a lawsuit asking the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to direct BPA to restore the center, arguing that the language Craig inserted does not have the force of law. Craig's office counters that it does.

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Edition Date: 01-27-2006
Idaho Statesman