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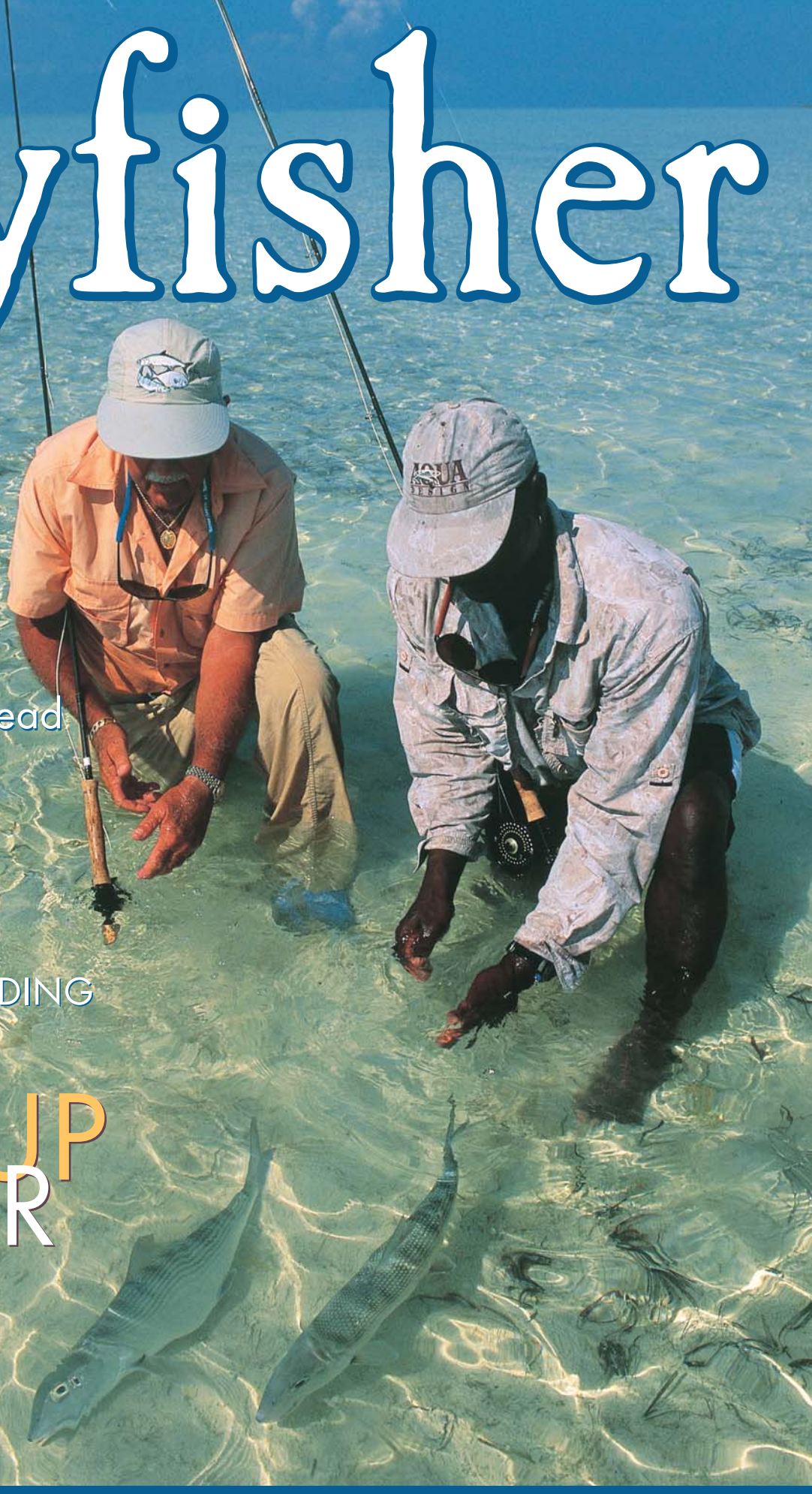

## TROUBLE ON THE SNAKE
Dams Threaten Extinction of River's Salmon and Steelhead

## FFF's Native Fish Policy
WHY IT'S NEEDED AND HOW IT WORKS

## Winter Steelheading
HOW TO GO GET 'EM IN THE BADGER STATE

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FIVE HOT SALTWATER DESTINATIONS

MAGAZINE OF THE FEDERATION OF FLY FISHERS
Conserving, Restoring & Educating Through Fly Fishing

# Snake River Salmon and Steelhead:

**"There is no scientific basis for concluding Snake River salmon and steelhead are likely to recover with non-breaching alternatives."**

Edward Bowles, Anadromous Fish Manager,
Idaho Department of Fish and Game, September 2000

**By Ed Chaney**

*Editor's Note: The following article is Part I of a two-part series. It provides an overview of the factors threatening extinction of wild Snake River salmon and steelhead in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Part II will describe the current situation and what fly fishers nationwide can do to help.*

In August 2003 President George W. Bush personally waded into the long-running, high-stakes conflict between dams and the premier salmon and steelhead fly-fishing resource of the Snake River Basin in southeast Washington, northeast Oregon and central Idaho.

The president was on a tour of the Pacific Northwest to shore up his environmental reputation. In the 2000 election he lost by narrow margins in both Oregon and Washington.

Bush met with large environmental protests in Portland and Seattle. Later he spoke to an invitation-only crowd at the Corps of Engineers' remote Ice Harbor Dam on the lower Snake River in southeastern Washington.

With the dam in the background, he excoriated environmental extremists, reinforced his 2000 campaign pledge to protect all four of the Corps dams on the lower Snake, and extolled the success of his administration's salmon and steelhead recovery efforts.

A coalition of Northwest environmental groups previously gave the Bush Administration an F for its salmon protection efforts. The federal court had earlier rejected the Administration's recovery plans as violating the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In fact, few of the measures taken since President Bush took office have had time to produce results. Even if they were all implemented they couldn't produce the recent upsurge in numbers of fish returning to the Columbia and Snake rivers.

Most scientists credit ephemeral weather and climatic factors, notably excellent ocean survival conditions.

Nonetheless, the president cited the recent increase in numbers of returning salmon and steelhead as evidence that the fish can avert extinction and be restored to formerly productive numbers without removing the four lower Snake River dams.

"It's a positive story," the president said.

Would that it were so.

In plain fact, however, it is an ongoing tragedy of epic proportions.

The public trust has been and is being betrayed. Billions of dollars have been lost to local, state, regional and national economies. Anadromous fish protection treaties with Indian tribes and Canada have been abrogated. Fish protection laws have been thwarted. Government has been corrupted. One of the nation's most valuable renewable fish resources has been put at risk of extinction.

## How We Got Here From There

The Snake River is the largest tributary of the Columbia River, which is the fourth largest river in North America, and drains an area larger than France.

The Columbia River Basin once

Photo by Michael Javorka

# Threatened With Extinction

produced 10 million to 15 million adult salmon and steelhead annually, including the world's largest populations of chinook salmon and steelhead. The Snake produced perhaps half the total.

For thousands of years prior to Euro-American invasion of the area, these highly migratory fish contributed to Native American Indian economies nearly 1,000 miles inland and thousands of miles along the Pacific coast.

In a relatively short period of time, non-Indian commercial fisheries and various land and water developments – notably the world's largest coordinated hydroelectric system – significantly reduced the amount and productivity of salmon and steelhead habitat in the basin.

However, thousands of miles of pristine streams in the Snake River Basin continued to produce prodigious numbers of salmon and steelhead until very recent times.

## Then Along Came the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

In the waning years of the gilded age of giant, pork barrel water projects, Congress authorized construction of four dams on the lower Snake River in southeastern Washington.

The resulting 140 miles [225 km] of end-to-end reservoirs made Lewiston, Idaho – 450 miles [724 km] inland – a seaport by connecting it to similar downstream reservoirs on the Columbia River. Sales of subsidized electricity generated by the dams subsidized waterway shipment of goods by barge.

The dams were authorized with the understanding that the Snake's valuable salmon and steelhead runs would be maintained at pre-project levels. Congress authorized construction of large upstream hatcheries to replace wild fish production diminished by the dams.

The Corps' design for the series of dams and reservoirs included fish ladders to allow upstream migrating adult fish to pass. Incredibly, the Corps made no provision whatsoever for their resulting progeny to migrate downstream through the reservoirs and past the dams.

The dams were completed sequentially from 1961 to 1975. The Corps' negligent failure to properly design the dams produced progressively disastrous results.

In low runoff years, juvenile fish

Photo by Holly Pickett/Spokesman-Review


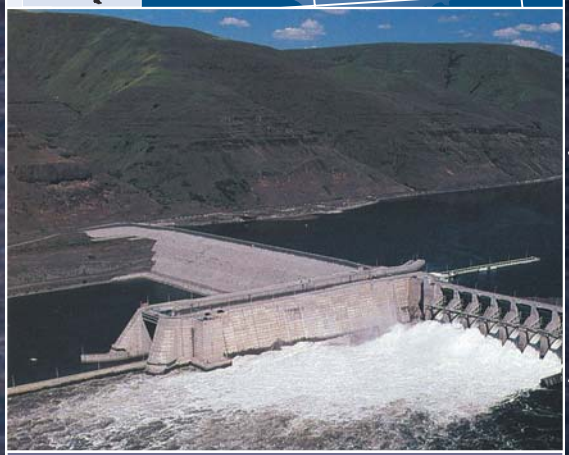

Photo courtesy Army Corps of Engineers

Top: U.S. President George Bush greets guests at Ice Harbor Dam near Pasco, Washington, Friday morning, August 22, 2003. Bush spoke about the salmon recovery and his opposition to dam breaching to a crowd of 300 people. Middle: At stake are wild salmon and steelhead produced in thousands of miles of high-quality habitat in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha drainages of southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and the Salmon and Clearwater drainages of Idaho. Bottom: The first of the lower Snake River dams, Ice Harbor, was completed in 1961 about 10 miles (16.1 km) upstream from the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers. The last of the four-dam complex was completed in 1975.

attempting to migrate through the series of slack-water reservoirs are subject to high levels of predation, high water temperatures and other adverse environmental conditions. During high runoff, they are exposed to deadly levels of nitrogen created by large volumes of water spilling over the dams. Fish forced through the dams' turbines suffer high levels of mortality at all flow levels.

The number of adult fish returning to the Snake River plummeted.

Over the years the Corps spent hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to remedy its design error. These efforts were analogous to scotch-taping wings on pyramids in an effort to make them fly. Snake River salmon and steelhead continued their precipitous decline.

In 1980 Congress declared the situation was an "emergency" and passed the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act.

The Act established the Northwest Power Planning Council and charged it with improving the survival of migrating salmon and steelhead at Columbia and Snake River dams.

Unfortunately, the politically appointed council soon was captured by the "Columbia River Pork Alliance," the regional clique of entrenched pork barrel economic interests, sycophantic bureaucrats and allied political demagogues who feed off taxpayers, public resources and each other.

This Pork Alliance is addicted to the status quo. For decades it has tenaciously, and thus far successfully, resisted required changes in the hydroelectric system no matter what the intent of law or the economic and human cost.

The intent and promise of the power act were thwarted. The condition of Snake River salmon and steelhead deteriorated from serious to critical.

The Corps' post-construction efforts to improve juvenile fish passage at the four lower Snake River projects proved inadequate.

To cover up, the Corps decided the only thing left to do was to strain the migrating juvenile fish from the river at the dams, put them in barges and trucks, and haul them 400 miles to the Columbia River estuary for release.

To its everlasting shame, the National Marine Fisheries Service – charged with protecting salmon and steelhead – eventually became an increasingly enthusiastic accomplice to this ecologically challenged Rube Goldberg scheme.

The Snake River's fragile wild juvenile salmon and steelhead were less enthusiastic about this draconian interruption in their natural life cycle. Progressively fewer adult fish returned.

Consequently, from 1991 to 1997 all Snake River salmon and steelhead were listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA.

Biologists increasingly argued that the dams and reservoirs were so deadly, and barging fish so ineffective, the dams had to be breached – partially removed – to save the fish.

With the ESA gun pointed at its head, the Corps did a four-year, $20-million study of the relative benefits to salmon and steelhead of breaching the four lower Snake River dams to recreate a free-flowing river, or removing all the juvenile fish from the river and hauling them to the Columbia River estuary.

Only the most severely impaired

**"Studies conducted over the last 30 years have definitively shown that transportation [barging and trucking] has failed as a mitigation tool and is not reversing the decline of Snake and Columbia River salmon and steelhead."**

Comments of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on The Draft Lower Snake River Juvenile Salmon Migration Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement, *April 28, 2000, p. 15.*



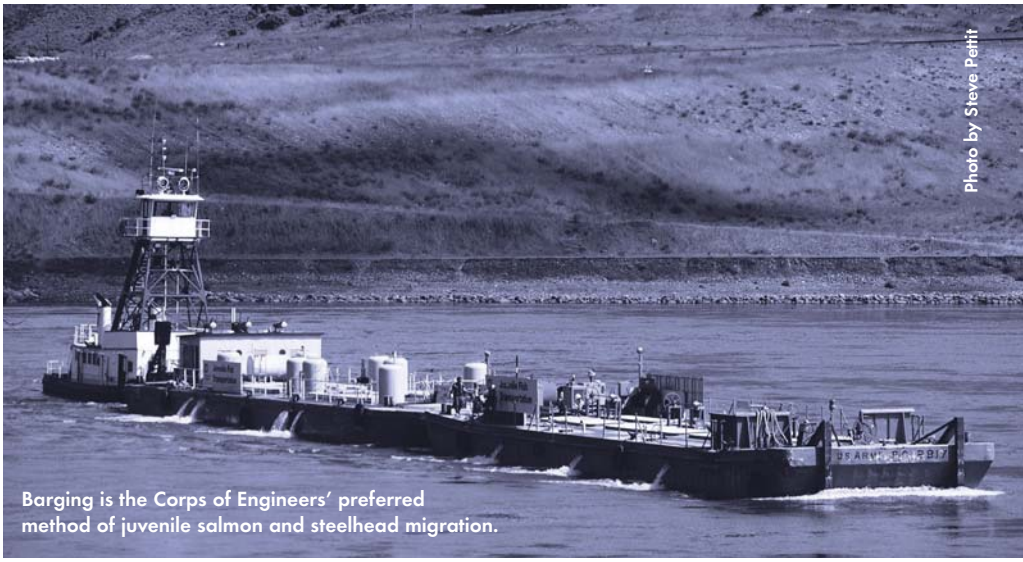

Photo by Steve Pettit

Barging is the Corps of Engineers' preferred method of juvenile salmon and steelhead migration.

The highly prized Snake River spring chinook salmon traditionally have not been targeted by fly fishers. Spring chinook generally enter the Snake River in May and June after spending two to three years in the ocean. They average 14-15 pounds with fish frequently reaching 30-plus pounds. Fly fishers have successfully pioneered fishing for them during low water conditions.

were surprised the Corps concluded the fish would be better off if the dams stayed in the river and the fish came out.

Meanwhile, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) – charged with developing a recovery plan under the Endangered Species Act – had caved in to political pressure to protect the dams at any cost.

NMFS already had admitted the obvious, i.e., the dams were the problem. So what to do? Out of desperation, NMFS resorted to smoke and mirrors. It opined a lot of unspecified habitat improvements elsewhere in the basin, by unspecified entities, with unknown funding, collectively would offset the adverse impact of the dams and result in recovery of the listed species. The mass destruction at the dams would continue unabated.

Fish advocates were unimpressed and sued in federal court. The court rejected NMFS' wistful thinking as violating the ESA.

At this writing NMFS is laboring to recast its smoke and mirrors recovery strategy so that it can pass muster before the court; in effect, to use the ESA to save dams instead of endangered salmon and steelhead.

It's not a pretty picture.

### Where From Here?

Many Northwest politicians are in thrall to entrenched pork barrel economic interests. The president of the United States has cast his lot with them. The NMFS – the ostensible guardian of salmon and steelhead – has been politically forced to the dark side.

But the plus-size lady has not yet sung by a long shot. As one Native American leader said, "The salmon are a patient people." Science, law, economics, the will of the people and right are on the side of breaching the four lower Snake River dams and restoring Snake River salmon and steelhead to formerly productive levels. The killer dams are on trial in federal court and before Congress.

The apologists for extinction are starting to sweat.

The situation is excellent.

*In the next issue: How fly fishermen nationwide can help restore Snake River Basin salmon and steelhead.*

**Ed Chaney is a natural resource consultant with 35 years professional experience with Columbia/Snake River salmon and steelhead. He is president of Chinook Northwest – a natural resource consulting firm – and director of the nonprofit Northwest Resource Information Center. He lives in Eagle, Idaho.**

## *FFF in Action*

# JUNE MARKS IMPORTANT DATE FOR SNAKE'S SEA-RUN SALMONIDS

**By Bill Redman**

The Federation of Fly Fishers and 15 other plaintiff sport fishing, commercial fishing, and environmental organizations have brought suit under the Endangered Species Act on behalf of the Columbia and Snake rivers' anadromous fish runs.

In his May 7, 2003 decision on the suit, the judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, sending the Columbia Snake Biological Opinion (BiOp) back to the National Marine Fisheries Service, also called the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries, or NOAA, because of "NOAA's reliance on federal ... actions that have not undergone ... consultation (with the federal action agencies), and non-federal ... actions which are not reasonably certain to occur."

NOAA was given one year to rework the BiOp, with quarterly progress reports to the judge and a targeted completion date of June 2004. Since then, the plaintiffs and the government have been skirmishing on the nature and scope of the rewrite, a reflection of the deep divisions concerning whether breaching the four lower Snake River dams should be on the table as an option.

The judge wrote that in June 2004 he wants to know, "what progress has or has not been made to bring the 2000 Biological Opinion into compliance with the Endangered Species Act." He continued: "The court has yet to address ... the science underlying the defendant agency's conclusions as to each of the threatened or endangered salmon species. The court therefore does not intend to delve into the science during the remand period." He will do so after remand. His decision and instructions for rewrite suggest that this judge takes ESA protection of Columbia-Snake steelhead and salmon seriously, a good sign.

June 2004 and the months that follow will be an interesting and critically important time for Columbia Basin sea-run salmonids. Meanwhile, to help make sure the Bush administration doesn't ignore wild salmon and the fly-fishing community, please visit www.wildsalmon.org and take action today!

Bill Redman is chairman of the FFF's Steelhead Sub-Committee. He lives in Bellevue, Washington.