



The Columbian

## **Analysis favors removal of Condit Dam**

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**By Kathie Durban, Columbian Staff Writer**

Plans to remove 94-year-old Condit Dam on the White Salmon River cleared another hurdle Friday when the Washington Department of Ecology released a final environmental impact statement that predicts dam removal would restore the viability of the river's salmon and steelhead runs in the long term.

The document made it clear, however, that the dam's owner, Portland-based PacifiCorp, will be expected to minimize the inevitable downstream damage from demolishing the dam, draining the reservoir behind it and unleashing 2.2 million cubic yards of sediment that has built up behind the dam over nearly a century.

The department is a key player in PacifiCorp's eight-year effort to dismantle the dam and return the river to a free-flowing state. The agency must certify that the project meets federal water quality standards and issue a state construction stormwater permit before the project can go forward.

PacifiCorp hopes to remove the structure in October 2008 at a cost of about \$20 million. At 125 feet, Condit Dam would be the highest dam ever dismantled in the United States. The demolition would provide salmon and steelhead access to as much as 32 miles of river habitat and restore spawning, rearing and overwintering areas for threatened bull trout, according to the EIS.

Although the sediment released by dam removal would bury an existing chum spawning area, conditions over time on the lower river could allow a new population of threatened chum salmon to establish itself near the river's mouth, the EIS said.

Among the statement's findings:

Sediment from the reservoir, called Northwestern Lake, will accumulate behind Bonneville Dam, just downstream from the mouth of the White

**Salmon River, with impacts to a traditional American Indian fishing site near the river's mouth.**

**Shock waves from the blasting that takes down the dam will kill any fish in the immediate vicinity.**

**All fish and aquatic life downstream of the dam in the White Salmon and the Columbia River as far as Bonneville Dam are likely to be killed or displaced by the plume of sediment. Spawning gravels for chum salmon may not be restored for up to five years.**

**A blanket of sediment 5 feet deep will accumulate in the Columbia River and cover about 100 acres of the river bottom. Crustaceans, aquatic insects and freshwater mussels will be buried, but recolonization should occur within a year.**

**High turbidity will continue throughout the first year as the restored riverbank and river channel stabilize.**

**The EIS outlines actions PacifiCorp must take in the short run to lessen environmental harm during dam removal, such as excavation of some of the sediment behind the dam. The utility agreed in 2005 to undertake some of those steps.**

**PacifiCorp will pay to install a removable weir in the White Salmon River before dam removal to redirect some returning adult Chinook salmon into ponds, where they would be held until they spawn. Their eggs would be harvested, preserving the genetic identity of the run.**

**The company will be required to install a new water system near the current dam to serve a nearby orchard, which currently draws water from Northwestern Lake.**

**It may be required to remove a cofferdam system that was used to build the dam originally. The structure was left behind in the reservoir and subsequently flooded.**

**PacifiCorp spokesman Dave Kvamme said project officials were reviewing the EIS Friday and that it appeared to be consistent with a revised settlement agreement reached with environmentalists and government agencies in 2005.**

**"We are encouraged by the progress and we want to implement this settlement agreement," Kvamme said. "What we are looking for is an order that confirms as closely as possible with the settlement agreement."**

Environmental groups that signed on to the original 1999 settlement with PacifiCorp called the EIS a positive step. Parties to that settlement agreed to the dam removal method PacifiCorp chose and said they would not challenge it in court.

"Rivers are remarkably resilient," said Amy Kober of American Rivers. "More than 700 dams have been removed on rivers across the country, with significant benefits to fish and wildlife, clean water and recreation. The long-term benefits of removing Condit Dam far outweigh any short-term impacts."

She noted that the EIS points out that fish returned quickly to the Toutle River following the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens and reached pre-eruption numbers within five years, despite predictions from fishery managers that recovery would take decades.

Klickitat and Skamania counties oppose dam removal and have filed as intervenors with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which must issue the final dam removal permit.

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## Update

\* **Previously:** Last October, the National Marine Fisheries Service concluded in a biological opinion that failure to take out 125-foot Condit Dam would result in long-term decline of salmon and steelhead runs on the White Salmon River.

\* **What's new:** The Washington Department of Ecology released an environmental impact statement Friday that says despite short-term adverse impacts, dam removal would benefit both fish and habitat in the long run.

\* **What's next:** The department has two months to decide whether to issue a certificate saying dam removal will comply with federal water quality standards. PacifiCorp, the dam's owner, needs that certificate before it can get a permit to dismantle the dam.