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Dams' demolition will give NW's wild salmon a break

Sandy River basin - PGE will begin tearing down Marmot Dam to create a barrier-free route to spawn

PGE is beginning to demolish two dams in the Sandy River basin -- a historic move that will save money, restore migratory fish habitat and wipe Roslyn Lake off the map. This summer, contractors will start drilling and sawing the 47-foot-high Marmot Dam on the Sandy River, the largest dam removed on the West Coast in the past 40 years, PGE said. Next year, contractors will cut down a smaller dam on the Little Sandy River and push in the berms of the 100-year-old manmade lake, which was used to store the rivers' water above the Bull Run Powerhouse.

The plan, announced eight years ago, is intended to give wild fish a barrier-free route between Mount Hood and the Pacific Ocean. "It's a business decision that makes sense for the environment," said John Esler, the power company's acting director of hydro licensing and water rights.

The company intended to relicense the Bull Run Hydroelectric Project in 1999 when it took a hard look at the costs of maintaining aging infrastructure and meeting potentially stricter environmental rules.

The project generates a relatively small amount of electricity -- enough to power about 12,000 homes -- and the calculation was clear, company spokesman Mark Fryburg said. "Our estimate back then was if we removed the dam, it would cost \$20.4 million. If we kept the dam, it would cost \$27.2 million," Fryburg said. The project should be completed next year.

PGE got its final permit for the plan this week from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But it has spent years working out the details. In 2002, it announced a removal agreement negotiated with 22 groups.

But the project had to wait until this year to protect a wild fish sanctuary.

Right now, hatchery fish, identified by their clipped fins, are pulled from the Marmot Dam's fish ladder and sent back downstream. Wild fish swim to the sanctuary above the dam.

Removing the dam meant removing that sanctuary.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife changed its hatchery on the Sandy in ways that protect wild fish. Hatchery workers now use eggs from wild parents instead of generic stock. Before they are released, workers spend about four extra weeks imprinting them with "home" water of a creek well below the dam. When these fish return from the ocean to spawn, they are more likely to return to the creek than to stray upstream, said the agency's district fisheries biologist, Todd Alsbury. However, that first group of new hatchery fish won't return until next year, so destruction of the dam couldn't begin until now, planners said. Wild fish should benefit in several ways. Summer flow in the rivers should be faster and colder, which is better for young fish, Alsbury said. Summer power generation takes almost all the water from the Little Sandy and more than half of the water that reaches the Marmot.

Conservation corridor

Also, PGE is donating 1,500 acres in the basin to the Western Rivers Conservancy, which will sell it to the Bureau of Land Management. Western Rivers will then use that money to acquire more land, working toward a 13-mile conservation corridor along the Sandy and a four-mile corridor along the Little Sandy, said Josh Kling, Western Rivers project manager.

In an average year, about 2,000 wild spring chinook, 1,000 wild steelhead and 2,000 wild coho make it above the Marmot Dam, Alsbury said. With better habitat, those numbers could triple or quadruple, he said. Landowners and fish advocates worry about how 1.2 million tons of sediment stored behind the Marmot Dam could affect the Sandy and its fish. Scientists continue to study the issue, Fryburg said. However, biologists believe fish are used to dealing with regular blasts of sand and silt, Alsbury said.

Before the Marmot demolition begins, workers will build a temporary dam upstream to hold back water. Winter storms are expected to push the sediment downstream.

Loss of lake lamented

In Sandy, many residents mourn the loss of Roslyn Lake, where PGE has operated a park for fishing and swimming. When the decision was announced eight years ago, hundreds of people turned out at a community meeting to protest the loss.

PGE said it has tried to find a group to accept the Roslyn Lake land as a donation and run it as a park. However, no one wants the land without the lake, Fryburg said. PGE plans to sell the land, which is currently zoned for farming and forestry.

Bill King swam across the lake every summer day when he was a child; he still takes his three sons there to fish and swim. The lake may be manmade, but wildlife have come to rely on it, as have humans, he said. "All you have to do is go up there on any summer day. You can't find a parking spot in that place," he said. Now "we're resigned," he said. "A large corporation has made the decision, and we're not going to have any voice."

Amy Souers Kober of the group American Rivers said she has encountered a mix of emotions from residents while she makes a short film about the dam removal. "There are tradeoffs," she said. But the Sandy River is "the quintessential river," she said. "Once you've got the dam out, it will really have everything you want a river to have."