



The Columbian

Federal fisheries: Do away with Condit Dam

Friday, October 20, 2006

By KATHIE DURBIN, Columbian staff writer

The National Marine Fisheries Service has concluded that removal of Condit Dam on the White Salmon River would greatly improve conditions for the river's threatened chinook salmon and steelhead runs in the long run despite negative short-term impacts.

In a long-awaited biological opinion released this week, federal fish managers said that failure to take out the 125-foot-tall dam would result in long-term decline of the fish stocks and could even drive runs to extinction.

"Breaching Condit Dam and draining the reservoir will release large plumes of sediment and turbidity, which will further degrade the habitat for some time," the service said. But biologists said the dam's removal "will ultimately remove a factor that has limited viability" of the river's salmon and steelhead populations.

Taking out the dam would open 33 miles of native steelhead habitat above the dam and 14 miles of habitat for spring chinook salmon. Biologists said it would restore natural river processes, such as the transport of spawning gravel and large woody debris, and lower the water temperature in the reach downstream from the dam.

As long as the dam remains, the biological opinion said, it will continue to block the formation of pools and riffles and the deposit of gravel, depriving adult fish of important resting and spawning habitat and reducing rearing habitat for juvenile fish migrating downstream.

If the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission permits the dam's destruction, Condit would become the tallest dam ever dismantled in the United States.

The findings are good news for PacifiCorp, the Portland-based utility that owns the 93-year-old structure. PacifiCorp hopes to remove the dam in October 2008 at a cost of \$20 million.

Environmental groups that were parties to a settlement agreement supporting the dam removal plan welcomed the federal opinion.

"This document represents one of the critical final steps in the dam removal process," said Thomas O'Keefe of the group American Whitewater. "Fishery biologists have confirmed that removing the dam will represent a significant benefit for salmon populations."

Opponents of dam removal, including Skamania and Klickitat county officials and owners of cabins along the reservoir behind the dam, have objected to the utility's plan for taking out the dam. That plan calls for blasting a hole near the dam's base, draining the reservoir and releasing 2.2 million cubic yards of sediment built up behind the structure.

A draft environmental impact statement prepared by the Department of Ecology found that the sediment plume would kill all fish and other aquatic species below the dam and displace fish in the Columbia River downstream to Bonneville Dam.

It also would wipe out a population of endangered chum salmon, possibly for generations.

Ecology must find that the project won't harm water quality in order to issue a Clean Water Act permit for the project. Its findings are expected in January.

Federal biologists said they were satisfied that the impact of the sediment release would be temporary. Under the plan, a removable weir would be placed in the river before dam removal to redirect some returning adult chinook salmon into ponds, where they would be held until they spawned.

Their eggs would be harvested, preserving the genetic identity of the run and assuring its survival to the next generation.

Fish not collected would likely perish, and their eggs would be smothered beneath the sediment, biologists said.

Other hazards to fish during dam breaching would include erosion caused by construction of an access road, and drilling and blasting while creating the drain tunnel.

Biologists predicted that sediment would be flushed from the reservoir over a period of six hours, minimizing long-term impacts.

They said fish likely would have access to the new upstream habitat within a year and that habitat on the lower reach below the dam site would be usable within two years.

Update

Previously: PacifiCorp, the owner of Condit Dam, applied for state and federal permits to remove the 93-year-old structure on the White Salmon River in October 2008.

What's new: The National Marine Fisheries Service has given a thumbs-up to the dam-removal project, saying it will benefit threatened salmon and steelhead in the long run and won't jeopardize their survival.

What's next: PacifiCorp still needs permits from the Department of Ecology, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission before it can take out the dam.