

Idaho Wild Salmon Recovery Thwarted. Why?

As we argue about how to create a stable Salmon run we seem to be moving away from what we really need. Our current fish runs are slightly better than we had due to the regulation and public concern generated 14 years ago with the eminent loss of ocean run Salmon. The question I have is why the sudden pacification of the good sense outcry that started the actions that have ultimately resolved the argument. The steps that were taken to assure adequate water release has without a doubt closed the argument of what has happened to wild fish runs and why. With demonstrable evidence available now, why are Washington, Oregon and Idaho not making moves to benefit its economy and resources? Some will still try to argue that the dams were here when we had the big runs just a few years ago, here is why. The regulation of the draw downs to keep our Salmon from going extinct and then regulating more water from the upper reaches of the Snake through the larger dams and creating a barge system to bypass the lower Snake River Dams and lets not forget the record snow packs and high water flows that all but closed the debate on the effect the dams are having. With better flows to the ocean the more wild Salmon and Steelhead, it's just that simple. (remember it takes a while to return from the ocean)

We have the lower Snake River dams below Lewiston to thank for almost ending ocean run Salmon in Idaho, the spawning grounds for Columbia River Salmon. The other species that is most often overlooked in arguments against the dams is Bull Trout. The connection between Bull Trout and Salmon is an important factor in the health of our rivers. As a child growing up on the Clearwater River and its tributaries, I have seen the dwindling and virtual disappearance of Bull Trout in Idaho. Obviously the protective measures taken on behalf of these fish have helped keep a few of these fish in our rivers, but without the wild Salmon and Steelhead we had in the past, the numbers of these fish are a fraction of what is possible and will always be at the verge of extinction. Without the food sources generated by wild (not hatchery) Salmon and Steelhead, other species suffer and so does Idaho's economy. The eggs released by spawning fish, is key to the proliferation of Bull Trout, but it goes much deeper than that. When the carcass of the Salmon rots away, it creates bugs and other aquatic life in abundance to maintain healthy populations of fish year around, including baby Salmon.

Bigger bugs mean bigger fish, more people coming to fish for them and spending money in Idaho. The hatchery system we have now is a crucial piece to restoring a pre-dam fishery, but has proven over the years to fall short of solving the problem alone. Barging predominantly hatchery fish to the ocean has succeeded only to verify and demonstrate how important it is to open the lower Snake and free the path for wild fish. Before the advent of the barges the percentage of loss for hatchery before reaching the ocean was horrific. The band-aid fix of the underlying problem has only impacted the hatchery fish to a marginally acceptable degree.

The big argument has always been the economic impact and the cost of removing the dams. Let's first address dam removal. No one is saying the dams need to be physically removed. With a push of the button the locks open and we have free flowing water. Another misconception is losing water for irrigation. As of the last few years the amount of water to be released from upper snake reservoirs has been mandated by the government and will not change and has had no impact on irrigated farms. Opening the few lower dams would impact only a few farms, but the money being used to barge the fish could be used to retrofit alternate means to pump directly out of the river, problem solved.

As far as the loss of jobs at the Ports of Wilma and Lewiston, these would soon stabilize with a transfer of labor to support the same products being shipped by rail. This has already been tried during two years of the draw down with little impact or problems with the economy. A planned strategy considering the number of new job demands would surely replace old jobs with new ones. Looking at the whole picture makes this a much brighter option for everyone. Consider the dramatic increase in tourism, restaurants, motels, gas stations, gift shops, outfitters, etc., would all see increases. These small businesses barely surviving in small communities along the rivers would see uncalculated increases in revenue and job growth. This is proven by the millions generated by the fishing seasons in Riggins alone.

The interest in coming to fish Idaho would increase ten fold and these people would come from all over the world to experience what it would have been like to fish Idaho a hundred years ago. It can be again one of the most spectacular fisheries in the World. People now paying to go to Alaska and other destinations would be coming to Idaho. Word would spread in magazines, by TV shows and other media that Idaho is the place to go.

The increase in jobs and state revenue would far outweigh any possible or temporary loss of jobs at the ports. The scare tactics that have thwarted the freeing of Snake River water is just that, scare tactics. The advantages of restoring wild runs of not only Chinook, but Sockeye and Steelhead in a few years would bring a huge economic windfall to Idaho. The handful of people negatively impacted in the Lewis and Clark Valley are insignificant to the thousands throughout Central Idaho, Washington and Oregon who would be generating revenue from increased sporting opportunity.

It is time to restore the health back to Idaho's rivers and streams and improve the economy at the same time. It is the obligation of those with authority and our lawmakers to look at the facts. The studies are in, the facts are there. We are so close to realizing the return of one of the largest Salmon runs in the world, it would be a moral catastrophe to let ignorance and misinformation (propagated by the power companies and a few self serving corporations) succeed in killing such a lasting resource that only the Rivers of Idaho have the ability to restore.

It is imperative that the farming and ranching communities in the effected areas realize the true impact of restoring the free flowing Snake from at least Lower Granite to the mouth of the Snake. Many propositions assure that irrigation already used would not be lost. Back water from Lower Granite that creates recreation for the Lewiston and Clarkston area would not necessarily be removed, but instead regulated to help, not hinder migration to the sea. The outdated, archaic lower three dams are the most damaging; opening those dams is the simplest solution with the greatest upside for Idaho.

It is not the object of this editorial to detail scientific studies regarding this controversial issue, but to emphasize what would be a positive resolution for everyone's enjoyment and benefit.

Cordially,

Jess Baugh
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