

'Fish flush' could be part of orca and salmon recovery



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A view of Ice Harbor Lock and Dam on the lower Snake River, June 6, 2005 near Burbank, Washington. In late May 2005, a federal judge in Portland, Oregon rejected the Bush administration's \$6 billion plan to improve dams on the lower Snake River and Columbia River ruling it failed to protect threatened and endangered salmon under the Endangered Species Act. Ice Harbor is one of four dams on the lower Snake River that environmentalists and others want to see breached in an effort to restore the dwindling salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest.

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By **Joel Connelly**, SeattlePI Updated 5:55 am PST, Wednesday, January 30, 2019

The state Department of Ecology is unveiling a proposal that would increase water spilled over Columbia and Snake river dams, to assist downstream migration of young salmon and ultimately help endangered killer whales.

The expanded spring "fish flush" is part of Gov. Jay Inslee's bid to increase fish populations in order to boost survival of the critically endangered southern resident population of orcas off the Washington coast and in inland waters.

"Helping more juvenile salmon survive the journey to ocean is one of many steps we want to take to protect and restore salmon: Our hope is that this will also support the recovery and sustained health of our orcas," Inslee said in a statement.

The killer whales are finicky eaters and exist largely on chinook salmon

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"This is an important short-term action we can take to help inform our decisions about what will work over the long term."

The spill would apply to four Army Corps of Engineers dams on the lower Snake River, as well as four federal dams on the lower Columbia River.

Any increase in water spill at dams is likely to generate opposition, particularly from two members of Congress from Eastern Washington, U.S. Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Dan Newhouse.

They managed to get a Republican-controlled House to pass legislation in 2018 that would have reversed U.S. District Court Judge Michael Simon's order for increased spill, and put in place a 2014 salmon recovery plan that has not passed muster with federal courts.

The "protection" of Snake River dams, which environmental groups want removed, has become holy grail for Republican politicians.

"The man and the fish can coexist," then-presidential candidate George W. Bush told a 2000 rally in Spokane. As president, Bush staged an event at Ice Harbor Dam near Pasco, to celebrate one year's high salmon return.

In a Tri-City Herald op-ed last year, McMorris Rodgers, Newhouse, and GOP Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler declared: "Dams and fish can coexist." They cited figures of steadily higher survival of salmon migrating downstream on the Snake River.

"While anti-dam voices are persistent, they choose ideology over science, which would have a negative impact on you and your families," the House members argued.

The "impact" comes in reduced power sales during spring months when, as the late Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus quipped, "Californians are using their hot tubs."

The Sierra Club's point person on salmon, Bill Arthur, was lobbying for spill in Olympia on Tuesday. Spill is "essential for both salmon and Orcas," Arthur argued in a Facebook post.

The Department of Ecology is responsible for regulating levels of dissolved gases in waters below the dams.

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The expanded "fish flush" would test benefits for fish passage with higher levels of oxygen and nitrogen in the water.

"As always, science is our guide and we need to balance potential benefits to juvenile salmon without too great of risk to other fish," Maia Belton, director of the Department of Ecology, said in a statement.

The Department of Ecology will hold two hearings on its proposal, which is supported by Gov. Inslee's proposed budget.

The first will be Feb. 13th at 2 p.m. at the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver. The second, at 6 p.m., on Tuesday, Feb. 19th, will be by webinar. Information can be obtained on the Department of Ecology website.

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