LTE submitted by Amy Stuart to Oregonian

Governor Kate Brown (OR) recently wrote a letter to Governor Jay Inslee (WA) supporting a pathway to breach the Lower Snake River Dams. I am writing because the Lower Snake River salmon and steelhead and Southern Resident Orcas are out of time.

The first request to list Snake River Chinook salmon as endangered was in 1978. This was 10 years after the construction of Ice Harbor Dam on the Lower Snake River. The listing was deferred because of passage of the Northwest Power Act in 1980, which established a Fish and Wildlife Program that was supposed to resolve Columbia/Snake River hydro system impacts on salmon and steelhead.  After ten years of the NW Power Act, it was clear that BPA wasn’t able to hold up their end of the bargain.  By 1992 most Snake River salmon and steelhead populations were listed as threatened or endangered.

It is time to take strong actions to save and recover these salmon populations that are important to the Pacific Northwest. In the past 40 years the region has tried every expensive techno fix to avoid breaching the 4 Lower Snake River dams.  We are out of options and the Lower Snake River dams must be breached.

The current quick-fix is a 3 year “Flex spill” agreement, which allows water to spill over dams in in the spring time for 16 out of 24 hours in a day.  The remaining time is to maximize generation.  Increased spill over dams means lower mortality for juvenile fish compared to travel through dam powerhouses which cause high mortality.  However, it is not a long-term solution to address the salmon crisis. The Flex spill was first implemented in the spring of 2019. Under the agreement, fish passage must be better or at least no worse than what would have occurred under the court ordered spill.  Fish passage through powerhouses, and therefore juvenile fish mortality, was generally higher under the Flex spill implemented in the spring of 2019. The question is will higher spills with a 125% “dissolved gas cap” be provided in 2020 and 2021 and will juvenile fish survive better than the past court ordered spill?   The Flex spill agreement is a temporary measure to stop further lawsuits until BPA and NOAA Fisheries release the next Columbia River Systems Operations Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), due out to the public in February 2020, also likely with their next round of techno fixes.  It is not a long-term solution to the salmon crisis.

There are serious flaws in the Flex spill agreement**.**For example, 3 of the mainstem dams, Bonneville, The Dalles, and John Day cannot meet the proposed higher 125% dissolved gas cap, intended to improve juvenile fish passage over dams.  The Flex spill agreement lowers spill for 8 hours per day, but does not increase spill above the current 120% gas cap at the 3 Lower Columbia dams for the other 16 hours of the day, therefore causing a decrease in fish protection at these dams. Because spill is reduced at the lower river projects, our Oregon stocks from the John Day and Deschutes are likely to have increased not decreased powerhouse mortality. Given the weaknesses of the Flex spill agreement from a fish recovery prospective, it fails to provide a path forward to recovery.

The EIS must establish a path to breach the 4 Lower Snake River dams. The dynamics of energy production, the proliferation of solar and wind energy, and marketing provide an opportunity to take historic action. We are uniquely positioned at a crossroads in history to take definitive actions to recover our valuable fish species for the states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho. We need to avoid agreements that are inadequate to recover listed stocks, like the Flex spill agreement and more failing techno fixes.It is time to solve this salmon crisis once and for all.  It’s time for other Pacific Northwest leaders to step up to the plate along with Governor Brown.

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