Idaho may go to court to save salmon

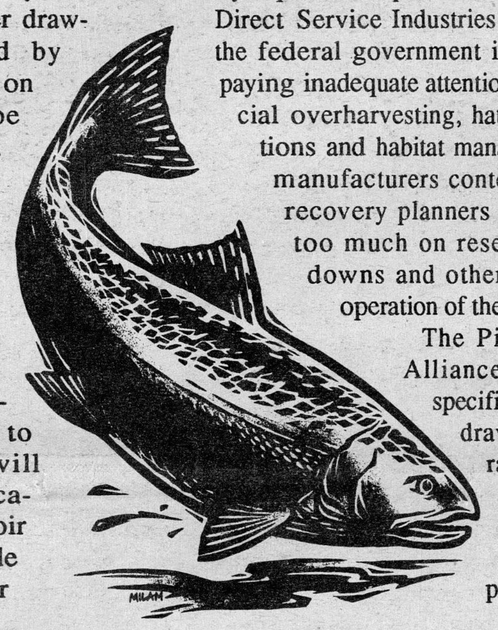
The battle to save the endangered Snake River salmon from extinction heated up this month, as Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus threatened to sue the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal agencies responsible for salmon recovery plans.

Speaking before a U.S. Senate oversight committee Dec. 2, Andrus accused the Corps and the Bonneville Power Administration of ignoring the Endangered Species Act and abandoning the region's wild salmon runs to extinction.

"I believe there are some who continue to think that if they hold out long enough there will be no salmon to worry about, and the energy system will be off the hook," Andrus told committee chairman Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore. Then, departing from his prepared remarks, Andrus added, "If I have to go to the federal courthouse in the name of Idaho, that's where I'll go."

The Army Corps responded a week later by issuing a draft report estimating that it will cost billions of dollars and take up to 17 years to rebuild Snake River dams to aid in salmon recovery.

Under the Snake River drawdown plan championed by Andrus, four large dams on the lower Snake would be partially emptied each year. That would accelerate the flow of the river, pushing salmon smolts to the sea. Last March the Corps did a month-long test, lowering water levels in two of the four dams.



But a draft report analyzing the test says that to work, the drawdowns will require structural modifications on dams and reservoir banks; new turbines capable of operating at lower water levels; new fish ladders and fish barging facilities; extended spillways and boat ramps; and the shoring up of port docks and grain terminals.

All of that, the Corps estimates, will cost between $1.3 billion and $4.9 billion, and will take 14 to 17 years to construct. The report also says that the March test resulted in $1 million-$1.6 million of lost electric power and cost riverside businesses almost $4 million in lost revenues

Anticipating those numbers, Andrus warned Hatfield not to trust the Corps study. "The contents of the report and the results of the test drawdown differ. The data are much more positive and straightfoward than their press release," Andrus testified. "I expect that, as usual, these will be worst-case estimates, and will contain the usual amount of gold-plating."

The Corps' criticisms, however, are just part of the growing resistance by Northwest utilities and businesses to changing the operation of the Snake and Columbia river dams to help endangered salmon. A group of aluminum and other hydopower-dependent industries — Direct Service Industries Inc. — sued the federal government in August for paying inadequate attention to commercial overharvesting, hatchery operations and habitat management. The manufacturers contend that fish recovery planners are focusing too much on reservoir drawdowns and other changes in operation of the dams.

The Pioneer Ports Alliance, formed specifically to fight drawdowns, has rallied behind the cry of "good science." The ports near the Washington-Idaho border say no proof exists that drawing down reservoirs to flush young fish to the ocean increases the number of salmon that return as adults.

In its recently released plan to help salmon, the alliance scorned the drawdown idea. Instead, the ports endorsed the Army Corps' program to barge salmon smolts around the gantlet of dams on the two rivers.

Jim Baker of the Sierra Club likened the alliance proposal to an oil spill: "It's very slick, very thin and very toxic to fish."

Baker and other environmental groups say the barging plan is a proven failure. They cite a 95 percent death rate for salmon smolts from dam turbines and from predators in reservoirs behind the dams. Baker also responds to concerns about the drawdowns hurting the Northwest economy by pointing out how much the region would benefit from healthy salmon populations and a multibillion dollar effort to rebuild dams.

However, environmentalists face an uphill battle. The ports alliance is supported by the Northwest Utilities Coordinating Council, which represents the major utilities that buy Columbia basin hydropower. It, too, insists that the drawdown plan is unproven and not worth the costs ratepayers would pay for lost energy production and dam reconstruction.

Likewise, the National Marine Fisheries Service, which is responsible for writing recovery plans for the three threatened and endangered Snake River salmon, issued an opinion this year saying that dam operations for the year would not jeopardize the salmon.

While the agency is not expected to change that for 1993, Andrus, in his testimony to the Senate oversight committee, warned that it "better not come back with a no-jeopardy finding, or we'll be in court."

— Julie Titone and Steve Hinchman

HOTLINE

Maybe, maybe not

Extensive genetic analysis by federal scientists failed to unlock the identity of the wolf-like animal shot Sept. 30 near Yellowstone National Park. Regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Ralph Morgenweck announced Dec. 10 that scientists are unable to determine if the animal is a purebred wolf or a wolf-dog hybrid because "some of the basic research on genetic differences between dogs and wolves has never been done." The agency said that its tests and an examination of the carcass revealed that the wolf is not related to those living near Glacier National Park in Montana. It also said that at the time of its death, the animal was in excellent condition, had a stomach full of elk and showed no signs of having lived in captivity. Because of the inconclusive results, the agency said it will not proceed with civil charges under the Endangered Species Act against the hunter, Jerry Kysar, who shot the animal.

BARBS

This sounds like almonds: hard on the outside and nutty on the inside.

Perry Pendley of the Mountain States Legal Foundation told the Wyoming Mining Association Dec. 8 that environmentalists are the same people who used to be communists before the fall of the Soviet Union, reports the *Casper Star-Tribune*. Pendley said environmentalists are like watermelons because "they're green on the outside and red on the inside."

Colorado coal firms see black days ahead

An attempt to encourage Colorado's electric utilities to find cleaner sources of electricity has drawn heated opposition from the state's coal industry.

The controversy is over Public Utilities Commission's proposal to begin Integrated Resource Planning (IRP). If adopted, IRP means that utilities needing new power supplies must compare traditional power plants and fuels against alternative technologies, such as energy-efficiency, renewable power and gas-fired cogeneration. Utilities must also include — in dollar figures — the environmental and social costs of each power supply option (*HCN*, 6/29/92).

Generally, IRP is backed by Public Service Company of Colorado, which supplies electricity to most of the state, and by consumer and environmental groups. But the regional coal industry fears that the new system will push alternative technologies over coal, which is the nation's cheapest and dirtiest source of power.

A new coal-fired power plant that cost $60 million, for example, might have environmental costs totaling another $60 million. A cleaner-burning natural gas plant could cost $80 million and have environmental costs around $20 million. Or a third alternative, using conservation to cut demand for energy rather than increase supplies, could cost $85 million, and have no environmental costs because it reduces pollution. Under IRP, a utility planning a new power plant would have to choose conservation because it has the least overall cost to society.

At public hearings before the PUC Nov. 2, several coal companies attacked the plan, calling it an attempt by environmentalists to shut down the coal industry.

"The primary actors in this effort are organized environmental groups acting as agents for commercial interests in the natural gas industry and in the renewable power sector," Frederick Palmer, president of the Western Fuels Association, told the commission. Western Fuels is the largest coal mining and transportation company in the region. It supplies 20 million tons of coal a year to public power utilities in the West and Midwest.

Palmer and others — including Peabody Western, ARCO Coal, Colowyo Coal, Cyprus Coal, the United Mine Workers Association, and the Colorado Mining Association — say that most of the coal industry's pollutants are already regulated under the federal Clean Air Act.

Adding environmental costs into the planning process under IRP — usually called "externalities" — represents a form of economic double jeopardy, they say.

"(Externalities) are an unnecessary layer of cost directed at the coal industry, which threatens the industry as a whole, the economies of northwest Colorado and (electric) ratepayers throughout the state," David Usilton, president of the Colowyo Coal Co., told the commission.

Industry officials also argued there is no credible scientific link between fossil fuel emissions and global warming, and therefore there should be no financial penalties for CO_2 emissions from coal.

The industry was supported by officials from Colorado's coal counties. Jim Evans, executive director of the Associated Governments of Northwest Colorado, said the externalities proposal could cost the state over 5,500 coal jobs, almost $20 million a year in tax revenues and a $280 million-plus industry.

However, Bruce Driver and Eric Blank, who head the environmental team working with the PUC on the new regulations, say that for decades the cost of coal-fired power has been kept down by ignoring its environmental and health impacts.

"Today, even after complying with the Clean Air Act and other laws, coal plants still have enormous amounts of emissions," says Blank. "Those emissions have significant economic, environmental and health impacts on Colorado citizens."

The externality rule, says Driver, is not a tax, but only a way of quantifying those costs during planning in order to compare the total impacts of each potential electric resource. "The coal industry is trying to cut off the debate on externalities," adds Driver. "They appear to be fearful of competing on a level playing field with efficiency, renewable power and natural gas."

Driver and Blank, who represent the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, a Boulder-based environmental law group, argue that a switch to energy efficiency could "lead to more jobs and higher personal income ... in addition to saving consumers money, reducing energy imports and cutting pollution."

Driver also criticized the coal industry for opposing provisions that fund increased public participation in integrated resource planning.

The PUC will issue its final IRP ruling early next year. It will also decide on proposals to give utilities an incentive to do more energy-efficiency programs.

— Steve Hinchman