

SENATE BILL REPORT

SJM 8010

AS OF FEBRUARY 21, 1991

Brief Description: Opposing the relicensing of the Elwha river dams.

SPONSORS: Senators Metcalf and Conner.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

Staff: Vic Moon (786-7469)

Hearing Dates: February 26, 1991

BACKGROUND:

The Elwha River wild chinook, especially the spring chinook, were once one of the largest salmon Washington rivers produced. It is theorized that this salmon's steep ascent through a series of narrow canyons acted as a mechanism for the natural selection of larger fish.

Records indicate 100 pound fish existed in the river. At its peak, the Elwha had 8,000 spawning chinook along with sizeable runs of other salmon species.

In 1912, the large dam on the mainstem of the Elwha River was completed. Despite laws enacted by the Washington Legislature in the 1890's requiring fish passage for anadromous fish around dams, this dam on the Elwha was not equipped with a fish ladder. Throughout 1913 and 1914 the then owners of the dam were threatened with dam removal unless fish passage was provided. The company finally agreed to donate land for a hatchery. The hatchery was unsuccessfully operated from 1915 to 1922.

The effect of the dam immediately reduced the number of salmon by 75 percent. The only species unaffected by the blocked passage was the fall chinook which spawned in the lower reaches of the river. In addition to blocked passage, however, the dam changed the flow patterns and increased the sediment accumulations on the spawning gravel thus eventually diminishing even the remaining runs of all chinook. Hatchery mitigation has not restored the salmon runs to anywhere near their historic level.

James River Corporation (previously Crown Zellerbach) own and operate the dam on the Elwha as a source of power for a mill operation. They have sold to the Daishowa America Corporation. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has been evaluating the relicensing of the dam for several years. As a result of several federal court decisions, the relicensing process will most likely involve mitigation for

the salmon and habitat lost as a result of the dam construction.

SUMMARY:

The Legislature supports the removal of the dams and advocates the restoration of salmon runs in the Elwha River.

Appropriation: none

Revenue: none

Fiscal Note: none requested