

SENATE BILL REPORT

ESHJM 4010

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Agriculture & Rural Economic Development, March 31, 1999

Brief Description: Requesting the federal government not to breach dams on the Columbia or Snake rivers.

Sponsors: House Committee on Agriculture & Ecology (originally sponsored by Representatives G. Chandler, Grant, Mastin, Linville, Clements, Lisk, Delvin, B. Chandler, Cox, Schoesler, Sump, Mitchell, Huff, McDonald, Mulliken, McMorris, Kessler, Buck, Reardon, Hatfield, Radcliff, D. Sommers, Edwards, Thomas, Ogden, Bush, Hankins, Skinner, Koster and Dunn).

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture & Rural Economic Development: 3/31/99 [DP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Rasmussen, Chair; T. Sheldon, Vice Chair; Gardner, Honeyford, Morton, Stevens and Swecker.

Staff: Bob Lee (786-7404)

Background: The federal government is conducting studies on ways to provide for the recovery of salmonids in the Snake River drainage that are listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. Studies are ongoing by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding alternatives to improve the survival of salmonids including improvements to dams to reduce fish mortality and the breaching of the dams.

The focus of attention has been on the four dams on the lower Snake River constructed and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition to generating electricity, the dams provide a navigation channel for barges that serve ports in Lewiston and Clarkston. If breaching of the dams was chosen as the preferred option, an appropriation by Congress would be required.

Summary of Bill: The importance of federally owned and federally licensed dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers is described. Certain findings of the 1995 study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding a natural river option for the lower Snake River are listed, including costs of the option.

The federal government is asked to acknowledge that, despite substantial analysis by the scientific community to determine the biological benefit of breaching dams, conflicting scientific views continue to exist. Thus, the federal government is asked to not consider breaching dams on the main stem of the Columbia or Snake River because of those

conflicting views and the adverse economic and transportation effects of the action on the region.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Testimony For: If the four lower Snake River dams are removed, the cost of shipping grain from eastern Washington will increase from 42 cents to \$1.03 cents per bushel, resulting in the price of wheat in eastern Washington to fall below \$2 per bushel because of loss in the use of barges. 35,000 acres of irrigated land in Washington State will be lost if the Snake River Dams are removed. This land produces food for approximately one million people. Also affected are significant investments in the farms, and allied suppliers and processors.

A legislatively commissioned study of the estimated cost to the state highway system to maintain and upgrade the roads for trucks to replace the capacity lost to the barge system will cost between \$500 million and \$1 billion. These numbers do not include the cost to local governments to upgrade their road system. There will be a loss in private and public recreational opportunities as existing parks and public access will no longer be located on the river. Existing rail lines adjacent to the river will be affected with the drawdown of the river level.

The power produced by the dams represents about a 5 percent reduction that will need to be replaced. A significant debt for construction of the four dams is still owed the federal government. If the four dams are breached, then there will be more dams that will be proposed for breaching on the Columbia River system. There is disagreement in the scientific community about the benefits of breaching the dams. If the Snake River dams were breached, quantities of silt that has accumulated behind the dams would be released and would damage salmon that lay their eggs in downstream segments of the river. Predation and poor ocean conditions have greatly affected salmon populations. Predation by birds in the lower river is being addressed and poor ocean conditions are reversing. Improving conditions in upriver habitat will provide more benefits for fish than breaching the dams.

Testimony Against: All options should be on the table as plans are being formulated to restore salmon runs in the Snake and Columbia River basin. The state is begging for national attention if it fails to produce a plan that will not restore the runs. For restoration efforts to be successful, the river needs to be returned to more normative conditions. Removal of the dams is needed to produce a minimum survival rate.

The removal of the dams will result in a loss of 1100 megawatts of power production but this can be made up with energy conservation. Currently, power rates in the northwest are \$600 million below national market rates. There is a technological fix to maintain irrigation and compensation for irrigated farms is being considered. Jobs will be created in the trucking and rail system as use of barges is decreased.

The fishing industry from California to Alaska has been adversely affected by the industrialization of the Snake River. Three dams on the mid Columbia River have approved habitat conservation plans in place. The three Columbia River dams are not endangered but the Snake River dams are not able to be fixed in the same way. Navigation and effects on

ports in the upper river continue to be a sticking point. Many scientists have sent a letter to the federal government endorsing breaching of the dams.

Testified: PRO: Ray Shindler, WA Wheat Commission; Jim Hasse, WA State Grange; Linda Johnson, WA Farm Bureau; Paul Parker, WSAC; Jim Potts, Rural Counties; Tim Myers, Whitman County; Aaron Jones, WA Rural Electric Co-op Assn.; CON: Rebecca Sayre, Sierra Club; Tim Stearns, Save Our Wild Salmon; Doris Cellarius; Lanny Carpenter, Puget Sound Gillnetters; Eric Espenhorst, Friends of the Earth; Marilyn Ahearn, Sierra Club; Joel Kawahara, WA Trollers Assn.