



US Army Corps
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North Pacific Region
Northwestern Division

Information Paper

January 21, 1998

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Corps Submits Biological Assessment On Steelhead

As action agencies for the Federal Columbia River power system, the Corps, Bonneville Power Administration, and the Bureau of Reclamation have issued a joint Biological Assessment on proposed operation of the system for steelhead. This assessment supplements measures taken by the action agencies in accordance with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) 1995 Biological Opinion for listed Snake River salmon.

The Biological Assessment recommends maximizing transport of juvenile salmon and steelhead from Lower Granite, Little Goose, Lower Monumental, and McNary dams during the juvenile fish migration season. To achieve maximum collection of juvenile fish, spill would be decreased at these collector projects and there would be added flexibility in minimum operating pool operation of the lower Snake River projects. The proposals are based on examination of the best available scientific and commercial information as required by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Most scientific studies to date, including an ongoing NMFS study that began with the 1994 juvenile salmon outmigration, indicate that transported juvenile steelhead return as adults in significantly larger numbers than in-river juvenile migrants.

Following issuance of the Biological Assessment, the agencies will begin formal ESA consultation on the proposed operation with NMFS and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. NMFS plans to issue a Biological Opinion and Section 10 permit (for the Juvenile Fish Transportation Program) prior to the early April start of the 1998 juvenile fish migration season.

Background

NMFS listed two Columbia Basin steelhead populations under the ESA effective October 17, 1997: Upper Columbia River (endangered) and Snake River Basin (threatened) steelhead. Decisions on five other steelhead populations in Oregon, Washington and California have been deferred for six months.

The steelhead listings bring the number of Columbia/Snake River ESA-listed salmon populations to five. Snake River sockeye, fall chinook, and spring/summer chinook salmon populations were listed in 1991-92. These species migrate past up to eight Corps dams on the lower Columbia and Snake Rivers. The 1995 NMFS hydropower Biological Opinion on the listed Snake River salmon includes "reasonable and prudent" measures for reconfiguration and operation, and evaluation of long-term measures at the dams for improved salmon passage.