

TRANSCRIPT:

From the BPA Newsroom –

Salmon, orcas, dams - federal agencies hold webinar for media

October 5, 2018

(Note: a few moments/comments of the 43:50 minute media briefing were not transcribed below. The full briefing can be viewed and listened to here:

<https://www.bpa.gov/news/newsroom/Pages/Salmon-orcas-dams-federal-agencies-hold-webinar-for-media.aspx>)

Scott Simms, BPA Communications Director: *(introducing and moderating the discussion) (0:00)*

We're calling on everyone who cares to become full informed before jumping to any conclusions. And we're committed to providing the latest scientific information and finding the common ground and identifying solutions to address the orcas' decline.

Kristen Jule, BPA fish and wildlife policy and planning manager (3:50):

"We administer the largest F&W program in the United States. We have other responsibilities such as meeting Tribal trust and meeting the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

The work that we are doing is really helping to reshape the Columbia basin for generations to come.

According to NOAA experts, in terms of abundance of salmon available to the Southern Resident Killer Whales, prey, populations of Snake River stocks are now greater than they were in the 1960s before the four lower Snake River dams were built.

Many of the efforts of BPA, and our federal and tribal partners have contributed to the increased abundance.

For example, juvenile fish passage through the federal dams has increased significantly as the result of physical and operational changes made at these facilities. Juvenile salmon and steelhead out-migration survival and travel times through the Columbia and Snake Rivers is close to what would be encountered in an undammed river system. Other fish and other species have benefited from extensive habitat restoration projects we and our partners do.

As NOAA-Fisheries states in their recent factsheet, the Columbia Basin is the largest source of natural and hatchery Chinook on the west coast.

Now we're going to shift briefly into the Southern Resident diet and distribution issue. (See Map) Only pods J and L pods are seen to come down to the Columbia River estuary and are likely consuming Columbia and Snake River fish.

NOAA-Fisheries scientists maintain that recovering salmon stocks for Killer Whales is well beyond the Columbia Basin and the hatcheries produces more than enough Chinook to offset the losses caused by the dams.

A recent study by NOAA-Fisheries stating the top ten priority Chinook populations for the Southern Resident Killer Whales illustrates this point very well. The Center recently published a factsheet that you can find on their website.

As we continue to learn there are many factors that lead to the current health and population trends for the Southern Resident Killer Whales and includes travel noise, vessel noise, toxics in the ocean. Prey consumption is just one of many factors contributing to the status of Southern Resident Killer Whales.

This graph is just for your benefit; it has the purple line up on top and that is the status of Southern Resident Killer Whales ; the graph is for the Snake River Chinook returning to Lower Granite, and we just wanted to point out that the graphic shows the trend of the Southern Resident Killer Whales and isn't just related to the trends of the Snake River Columbia returned fish.

As we think about these complicated natural resource issues, we really need to ensure that we understand the problem, that when we choose a solution that is actually going to have the most positive effect that we're striving for. We strongly believe that science should be the basis of our discussion and the foundation of our decision. Thank you."

(8:10) Simms introduces Beth Coffey, Army Corps of Engineers, Chief of Civil Works Integration Division. Ms. Coffey reviews the status of the court-ordered NEPA Review. Scoping generated nearly 400,000 comments and many expressed an interest in removing the 4 lower Snake River projects...breaching of the lower Snake River dams is one of the alternatives that is being examined.

Beth Coffey, ACOE: *"We have more than 30 cooperating agencies including Washington State and many Tribal Nations... We will examine the estimated costs of dam removal...including doing an analysis if we were going to breach the dams. DEIS due in Spring of 2020 for public review and comment and the Final EIS in March of 2021, with a Record of Decision by September of 2021.*

I want to clarify two statements...the terms breaching versus removal. Removal refers to removing the entire dam – earthen berm and the built structure, breaching refers to removal of just the soil embankment and also other necessary actions that will need to be taken...

Some of the other questions that arise - what are the costs of dam breaching and what are the actions we would undertake?"

(Ed: The basic message here from ACOE – dam removal is very complicated and costly – and here are many examples to illustrate this point.

Coffey, continued: *RE: Authorization steps: "Dam removal will require Congressional authorization... usually through the Water Resources Act."*

(16:00) Scott Simms introduces Kierin Connelly: addressing issues of reliability and costs. Mr. Connelly acknowledges the NEPA Review process underway and then states that his comments today will be based on past public information re: system of federal dams and energy generation in the Columbia Basin.

(Ed: for the most up-to-date and independent information re: the costs, feasibility, and potential carbon emissions impacts associated with replacing the energy produced by the lower Snake River dams, see NW Energy Coalition's 2018 analysis: Lower Snake River Dams Power Replacement Study, including 1-page and 4-page factsheets. (<https://nwenergy.org/featured/lsrcstudy/>)

Note: When Mr. Connelly states that these are some of the most affordable sources of energy in the Northwest region, he does not include the full annual and planned costs associated with the operation and maintenance of these four dams, for example, the annual salmon mitigation costs for Snake River salmon and steelhead populations, nor the impending replacement of 21 turbines in the lower Snake River dams; there are 24 turbines total; three are in the process of replacement now, at an estimated cost of \$100M.

II. Questions from reporters:

Question from Sue (?) at KOMO Radio in Seattle: *"What is the purpose of this briefing? Why is it occurring?"*

Answer: (There is interest in the community and we want to answer these questions.)

B. Question from Sue (?) at KOMO Radio: What are the biggest misinterpretations from folks who want to remove dams?

Answer: Kristen Jule, BPA: *"One of the things that we wanted to clarify is...where and when they're consuming Columbia and Snake River stocks fish; one of the things that we wanted to be able to identify is that, while we recognize that Southern Resident Killer Whales utilize Columbia and Snake River stocks, they are really not the limiting prey for these species. They are utilizing this prey source at certain times of the year and only some of the pods, in particular the J pod that was under so much scrutiny this summer is actually not one of the pods that comes down to the Columbia and consumes Columbia and Snake River stocks. And I think that the connection between the abundance of Columbia and Snake River stocks to the Southern Resident orcas well-being and their contributing to their status, I think that we wanted clarify that point."*

Beth Coffey, ACOE: ... The ACOE has a lot of authorized projects within the Puget Sound area that are ongoing in the construction, design or study to directly help those salmon stocks that Kristen just talked about to help Southern Resident...

“...We have a lot of activities that are within the Puget Sound that are ongoing, and have the authority and have the potential to move out quickly or are moving out quickly to provide benefits to salmon recovery. When we talk about the Snake River dams, that is more of a longer term analysis that we will do through the EIS. So it does not provide the more immediate solution to those salmon that are in the immediate area of the orca.”

Kierin Connelly, BPA: “We were feeling that there was a narrative from some corners that the impacts to the electric system would be negligible; and we wanted to point out that there would be real impacts to the electric side both in terms of cost and otherwise would need to be taken into account if we’re going to take this action.

Scott Simms, BPA: In summary...NOAA describes the Columbia Basin as “a bright spot” on the west coast, so I really encourage folks to seek out, and you’re hearing about breaching timelines – that being a longer term solution whereas Puget Sound actions that are in play are basically ready to roll here either in motion now or very soon. And lastly of course, the hydro-electric value of these resources and what they put out today and yesterday.”

Question from Lynda Mapes, Seattle Times: It sounded as if your answer to the earlier question was that Columbia-Snake River stocks are irrelevant to orcas and their recovery and their well-being. Is that truly your statement?

Kristen Jule, BPA: “No. no. I would not say they are irrelevant. They are relevant stocks to the killer whales. I guess that the point that we wanted to make is that geographically and timing, they are not the key limiting resource or prey for the Southern Resident Killer Whales, and to top that off the trends for these stocks have been increasing over time and so right now, basically, they are the most consistent prey source for the Southern Resident Killer Whales.

Lynda Mapes, Seattle Times: “I am just curious what you’re basing your conclusion on what is or isn’t a key stock to them. Those spring Chinook runs to the Columbia River; we see those K Pod sitting out there during the hungriest time of the year. They’re there to get those fish. On what are you basing your statements that those stocks are not key to those animals?”

Scott Simms, BPA, breaking in: “Let’s introduce, thank you Lynda, I know that you have had some other touch points with NOAA recently where they have deep-dived into these fish stocks and their availability and abundance, in fact as early as this morning. Let’s turn to Tim Dykstra, biologist for the Corps of Engineers, who can provide a little more detail here on this matter.”

Tim Dykstra, ACOE Biologist: "One of the main points here is that NOAA has identified 15 stocks of Chinook that are important to orcas, and what Ms. Coffey highlighted was several projects in the Puget Sound that would provide significant benefits to some of those populations that are identified as the most critical. You contrast that with focusing Snake River dams where Snake River dams have an impact on 2 of the 15 chinook, and so, removal or breach of Snake River dams at best a potential incremental benefit to 2 of the 15 deemed Chinook stocks."

Kristen Jule, BPA: "And to further that point, those Snake River stocks are doing quite well. Snake River fall Chinook is the highest numbers that we've had for decades. So the trend in those stocks is not showing a decline at this point in time."

Lynda Mapes, Seattle Times: "Actually that's not true, if you've looked at the returns this year for spring Chinook, they're in a deep dive and the jack counts are terrible. Anyway, everyone knows that these animals prey on a wide range of fish and that's what makes this so difficult for you all who are trying to manage this problem. I was getting the impression from listening to you that these fish aren't important and if you look at the ranking, I don't have the list in front of me, but the Snake River fish are in the top ten twice over."

Scott Simms, BPA: (responds by pivoting back to a focus on the Puget Sound, the degradation in the last 20 years based on anecdotal scuba diving experiences from his family.) "As you know, there is no one easy solution."

Kristen Jule, BPA: "I want to follow up on that point about the trends. We typically don't look at just one year of data and...salmon and steelhead are known for their cyclic...trends...survival over time. When we say there is an increasing trend that is what we're referring to, the trend over the past decade."

Lynda Mapes, Seattle Times: "I don't know what you are talking about. The Smolt-to-Adult Returns are those stocks, for Snake River Chinook, are not on a path to recovery. According to the Power Planning Council, we're supposed to be above 2 (percent) and we're not anywhere close to it and we never have been."

Kristen Jule, BPA: "Right, and I think that why we're generally bringing up this topic is because it's more about the relevance and short-term needs of Southern Resident Killer Whales and that we're really looking at immediate benefits for them and how can we alleviate some of the immediate stressors on them. And what we're saying now is that given that abundance trends are stable or increasing here, that there might be other areas that we can look at for pursuing solutions, near-term solutions."

Lynda Mapes, Seattle Times: "Maybe for the hatchery fish, but not for the wild fish."

Kristen Jule, BPA: "well, yeah, maybe that's one of the issues that we need to consider...."

Scott Simms, BPA: *“Let’s hear from some other folks who might have some questions for us today...(raises low carbon power, issue of integration of renewables; he then Kirin Connelley to weigh on the value of the lower Snake River dams in terms of integration of renewables)”*

Kirin Connelley, BPA: *(talks about renewables and integration of renewables – the lower Snake River dams do play a role...discusses multiple roles of the dams, recreation, etc, Lower Snake River plays a role throughout the year, depending our needs.*

Beth Coffey, ACOE: *(talks about documents and “progress” of their programs and evaluation of those programs. Lots of investments. More on the Corps’ authorities: we do have authorities in the Puget Sound (pivot back to the Puget Sound). But we don’t have authority to remove the four Lower Snake River dams...then on to “non-operational” status.)*

KC McAffrey, Clearing Up: *DamSense.org website says that ACOE can remove the four LSR dams based on the 2002 FEIS and Record of Decision.*

Beth Coffey, ACOE: *confirms the ACOE position: we don’t have authority, we don’t have plans. We can’t do it in the near-term.*

KC McAffrey, Clearing Up: *What about costs of \$80M? Is that in the ballpark?*

43:50. Audio ends.