

Editorial

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Clouding logic with silt

If silt buildup in Columbia worries dredging critics, why is it that silt problems posed by dam breaching don't?

A lawsuit brought last week by five conservation groups to block dredging a stretch of the Columbia River offers an interesting example of muddy thinking.

The main contention of the lawsuit is that dredging a 600-foot-wide shipping lane would cloud the water, stir up toxic sediments and thus do damage to endangered salmon and steelhead.

We're not as concerned about the silt that the dredging proposal stirs up because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has modified its plan to offset the adverse impacts of silt disturbance on the fragile estuary.

But how is it that the conservation group American Rivers and others are worried so much about silt in the lower Columbia while ignoring a much more severe silt problem that would occur throughout the basin if the four lower Snake River dams were breached?

The dredging project in the lower Columbia would displace an estimated 21 million cubic yards of sand, gravel and rock. Most of it would be pure sand and likely would not contain toxic material.

Dam breaching, on the other hand, would displace an estimated 150 million cubic yards of sand, gravel and toxic sediments, clouding the river for miles downstream, even past the McNary dam pool. Corps officials believe these sediments would make

stretches of the Snake and Columbia unhealthy for migrating salmon for several years after breaching was complete.

The dredging proposal would not create that kind of long-term risk. For one thing, the National Marine Fisheries Service, noting that salmon and steelhead migrate close to the river's surface, have required that all work take place within 3 feet of the river bottom. In dam breaching, the silt disturbance is much more pervasive than that.

The fisheries service also said the dredging project could go forward if steps were taken to protect the estuary, such as monitoring water quality, checking the shoreline for wake damage caused by larger ships, and restoring 5,000 acres of tidal wetlands in the lower Columbia. If greater-than-expected damage is found, the project would stop. That makes sense to us, not only as a reasonable level of protection for fish, but also as something that could make the estuary a friendlier place for fish than it is now.

But in the Snake River, once dam-breaching construction starts, it would be difficult to stop. And it would be even harder to reverse the temporary degradation of water quality — and damage to migrating fish — that digging out the earthen portions of those dams could cause.

Commentary

Channel-deepening plan fails salmon and the public

Fisheries service cannot sanction dredging by relying on vague promises from Corps of Engineers

The Oregonian ("Clouding logic with silt," Feb. 25) accuses environmental organizations of "muddy thinking" for filing a lawsuit opposing the Columbia River channel-deepening project.

To the contrary, the lawsuit follows the same crystal-clear logic that environmentalists used to force the National Marine Fisheries Service to identify coastal salmon as threatened with extinction.

Our main contention is that the fisheries service cannot sanction channel deepening under the Endangered Species Act by relying upon an uncertain, unclear and nonspecific set of promises made by the Army Corps of Engineers in the waning days of December 1999.

The Corps pressured the fisheries service to hurry up and resolve its significant scientific concerns about the channel-deepening project in order to retain federal funding eligibility. After the Corps promised a package of studies and habitat restoration in the final hour, the service

gave the project a green light, despite the lack of secured funding for those additional projects.

But without the package, the fisheries service agrees with us that the effects of channel deepening on salmon and other species are many, varied and serious. The agency itself continues to call the Columbia deepening project "an incremental insult to a degraded (estuary) system that is important in the salmonid life cycle."

What appears to concern the fisheries service most is how further deepening of the Columbia shipping channel will alter the food chain and habitat upon which juvenile salmon rely in the estuary. By rearranging the bottom of the estuary, the Army Corps of Engineers will likely change the ways in which salt and fresh water flow in the estuary, a change that will decrease available food and habitat for juvenile salmon that feed there as they prepare for their ocean life.

This food chain is already seriously damaged by a combination of three fac-

tors: extensive removal of wetlands from the estuary, the Columbia River dams and dredging.

In a nutshell, these factors — over 100 years in the making — have completely changed the foundation of the salmon's food chain from one based on material flowing from wetlands to one dependent upon upstream materials.

The deal between the two agencies calls for restoring estuary wetlands as a way to return the original, natural, food chain to salmon. We have no quarrel with that idea. However, the fisheries service failed to take into account the amount of time it

takes to restore wetlands.

It will likely be decades before salmon would reap the benefits of a restoration program. Starting now is fine, but wetland restoration cannot be the basis for allowing channel deepening.

Salmon now threatened with extinction cannot take this "incremental insult" while waiting for the long-term benefits of wetland restoration.



IN MY OPINION

Nina Bell

The fisheries service failed salmon and the public when it decided to support channel deepening based on a package of actions that may or may not happen, may or may not be successful and even under the best scenario will not yield results until many years or decades after channel deepening occurs. Not only is there is no guarantee that these projects will ever be approved by Congress, but the fisheries service did not require the Corps to secure funding before deepening the Columbia.

The Oregonian further urges support of channel deepening based on a dig-now-study-later approach. As interesting as the results may be, after-the-fact studies would come too late for fish affected by channel deepening. Moreover, the political clout that brings us channel deepening will surely be used to suppress any scientific rumblings of regret from within the agency.

That's the kind of muddy thinking we can do without.

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