

## **Cast a Wary Eye on Dam Removal Economic Studies**

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Last week, much hullabaloo accompanied press statements released by environmental groups and Klamath River tribes about the latest study of purported economic benefits associated with dam removal. Any time you see the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Eureka Times-Standard*, and the Associated Press unexpectedly and in unison regurgitate the same quotes from press statements issued by environmental groups – you have to wonder.

Last week, many of us for the first time learned (via the above sources) that a joint federal and state economic study had determined that it would be much cheaper to remove the Klamath River dams than to bring them up to modern environmental standards. Proponents for dam removal believe this latest report is ammunition in their fight to tear down PacifiCorp's dams and re-introduce salmon into the upper river system.

Bill Kennedy – who ranches in the Klamath Basin and the Sacramento Valley – perhaps best captured the obsession of dam haters in a recent letter to a newspaper reporter.

“Dam removal has become a mantra for many,” wrote Bill. “The discussion regarding healthy fisheries has been limited and focused to dam removal. Those who have limited our perceived choices see dam removal as a fix-all to a complex wildlife and social issue.”

And those mantra-chanting activists love to promote studies that back their views.

I've seen this happen before, in the Klamath River system and elsewhere, and I have to say.... I'm dubious.

Just last month, another economic report addressing the Columbia River system was trumpeted by anti-dam activist groups in Western urban papers. It suggested that removing four dams on the Lower Snake River – a tributary to the Columbia - could realize between \$4.2 billion and \$24.4 billion in savings and increased economic activity over 20 years. The report consists of compiled numbers from an array of already-published (and some discredited) studies from interest groups, government agencies and the Yakama Nation, while adding analysis from the interest groups that authored it. According to an analysis prepared by Northwest RiverPartners, the Snake River report makes “numerous fictional claims and advocates for a narrow, special interest of removing a critical, reliable and renewable energy resource: the Lower Snake River dams.”

Advocates for Snake River dam removal champion the same arguments made on the Klamath and claim that tearing out dams is a cost-effective way to restore wild salmon.

Unfortunately, assertions do not equal science. For example, the latest science indicates downstream juvenile salmon survival below the Snake River dams is as high as before the dams were built. The Snake River report authors do not quantify how much salmon survival is expected from removal of the dams, nor do they consider natural variability of runs caused by ocean and other conditions.

Just saying so doesn't make it true.

A similar report and media roll-out occurred closer to home just four years ago. In November 2002, a draft economic report on Klamath River recreational benefits prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) was preliminarily "leaked" to the *Wall Street Journal*. Amazingly, the USGS report concluded that the benefits achieved by increased recreational use would far outweigh the costs of buying local farms and forests, removing water supplies from California's Central Valley, and removing the Klamath hydroelectric dams.

Within hours of the *Wall Street Journal* reporting on the existence of the draft USGS study, a coalition of environmental groups had already obtained the report and issued a press statement that claimed the Bush Administration stifled the release of the report.

"The government does a great job of hiding data it doesn't like," said Zeke Grader of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA), at the time. "The stench of the recent fish kill in the Klamath River is permeating to the highest levels of the Bush Administration."

At the time, I was amused that PCFFA appeared to have overlooked the draft report's proposal to impose a long-term moratorium on fish harvesting in the Klamath-Trinity system. This ban would include terminating all harvesting by commercial fishermen (the very folks PCFFA claims to represent), halting marine harvesting by tribal fishermen, and imposing "sharp declines" in freshwater harvesting by tribal and recreational fishermen.

No matter to PCFFA and other environmental organizations – they were still able to cherry-pick from other areas of the report and convince urban media outlets that the draft report provided additional justification for removing dams on the Klamath River.

While several other Western economists came out later and found "severe problems" that limited the draft USGS report's use as a basis for policy decisions, the mainstream urban newspapers failed to publicize those differing views.

Now, admittedly, I have not taken the time to pore through the latest economic study of the Klamath hydro dams. After all, I just learned about it last week. But I will do so with a wary and skeptical eye, knowing that similar studies are full of simplified assumptions that do not always do justice to the complicated matters under consideration. Perhaps it is a sound report. However, there are tremendous risks in taking out dams, and I hope that Klamath River policy leaders are looking to make sure that those risks are properly addressed in this latest economic report.