

A Watershed-Wide Approach to Recovering Fish? What a Concept!

By Dan Keppen

Jim Connaughton, Chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, recently spoke at a salmon conference at Oregon State University, where he called for a comprehensive and collaborative approach to wild salmon recovery in the Pacific Northwest. In addition to addressing harvest and hatchery issues, Connaughton outlined the government's approach to employ a comprehensive and collaborative process intended to compliment past investments in habitat restoration and hydropower operations in the Columbia River system.

A "comprehensive and collaborative process"? What a concept! Why not try something similar in the Klamath River watershed, you might ask?

In fact, a similar approach – developed by a multidisciplinary, independent peer review committee of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) – was included in a 400-page detailed assessment and set of recommendations released in October 2003. As the Bush Administration prepares new ways to address Columbia River salmon challenges, we should remember that a comprehensive approach has already been proposed to address Klamath fishery issues.

The question is, will the NAS Klamath report sit on a shelf and gather dust, or will it actually be implemented?

The final NAS report clearly indicates that recovery of endangered suckers and threatened coho salmon in the Klamath Basin cannot be achieved by actions that are exclusively or primarily focused on one aspect, such as the operation of the Klamath Project. It emphasizes instead that a watershed-wide approach to species recovery – one that addresses all the stressors to fish – is essential to improving our environment and saving local economies. The NAS report stresses that increased knowledge, improved management, and cohesive community action will promote recovery of the fishes.

Although the NAS report contains recommendations that may make some irrigators swallow hard – such as possible removal of small dams within the distribution of coho – there are enough thoughtful ideas in the report to boost confidence in the hope that Klamath fishery challenges can actually be overcome.

The NAS report questions the current regulatory structure that governs Klamath fisheries management. In addition to calling for oversight of current federal agency management, the report recommends that the management structure for ecosystem restoration needs to involve local groups and private landowners in the design of restoration activities and investments. The report urges federal management agencies to recognize the nature of incentives in the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for private landowners to participate in ecosystem recovery.

In the time since the final NAS report was completed, it's been difficult for the layperson to see how the watershed-wide approach emphasized in the report is being implemented. Many irrigators remain concerned that the "business as usual" approach - regulation of the Klamath Project – remains the dominant aspect of ESA biological opinions and advocacy of Project opponents.

For example, the NAS report recommended that, within two years, federal agencies should prepare and promulgate recovery plans for coho salmon, as well as shortnose and Lost River suckers. Well, it's been over two years, and I've yet to see even draft versions of these critically important plans.

On the other hand, several actions identified by the NAS have been accomplished, including screening of water intakes and a new fish ladder at Link River Dam, screening of the A Canal, and significant progress made towards removing Chiloquin Dam. Importantly, however, it is not yet clear how these actions will translate into eased regulatory requirements for the irrigators served by the federal water project.

Meanwhile, James Connaughton's OSU speech kicked off a review by NOAA Fisheries of how harvest and hatcheries are affecting the recovery of ESA-listed salmon and steelhead on the West Coast. Predictably, Connaughton's speech was immediately blasted by some environmental groups, who want the focus to remain on dams and irrigated agriculture. Connaughton's comments—directed at Columbia River challenges - provide a sobering view of the sometimes curious fish “recovery” strategies that are being employed in the West.

“Almost in spite of our investments in habitat and hydropower, we still allow ourselves the luxury of eating threatened and endangered salmon that may be needed for recovery,” Connaughton said. “Although I recognize the complexity and broader equities of the matter, something still seems curiously out of synch here. These are salmon on the list of the ESA.”

The NAS Klamath report offers precious little assessment and recommendations regarding fish harvest, although it acknowledges that the recreational snag fishery for suckers and commercial salmon harvests affected fish populations in the early 20th century. However, the NAS committee strongly recommended changing hatchery operations, including going so far as to suggest closure of hatcheries, for the benefit of coho salmon.

I'm not saying that addressing harvest or hatchery management alone will solve the problems of the Klamath. However, they are definitely part of a much larger suite of actions that will be required to recover Klamath River Basin salmon. As envisioned by the NAS committee, this outcome, which would be a great benefit to the Klamath Basin, could provide a model for the nation.

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