

## **Northwest Study Suggests Factors Other Than Dams Impact Salmon Survival**

By Dan Keppen

Executive Director, Family Farm Alliance

A Pacific Northwest study has grabbed the attention of newspapers and scientists with its finding that downstream migration survival of endangered salmon and steelhead stocks on the dammed Columbia River system appears to be as high or higher than that of the same species migrating out of the Fraser River in Canada, which lacks dams.

The report – entitled “Survival of Migrating Salmon Smolts in Large Rivers With and Without Dams” – was published in the October 2008 edition of *PLoS Biology* journal.

The authors report that survival through the Columbia hydropower system has now increased to levels similar to those experienced in both the undammed lower Columbia River and in the Fraser River, an important finding that was not technically possible before the development of new monitoring technology.

You would think that these findings could be used as a basis to direct research dollars towards understanding numerous other fish stressors in the Columbia River system and Pacific Ocean. Unfortunately, anti-dam critics quickly found ways to try to discredit the report, such as claiming that it was nothing more than an advertisement for the new fish-tracking technology in which the lead author has a financial stake.

Dam opponents likely take umbrage at the report’s suggestion that conservation efforts in the Columbia may be better directed towards understanding the role that factors other than dam removal – such as ocean survival – play on salmon health. This type of one-track thinking is, unfortunately, becoming predictable. The response of the critics to the Columbia-Fraser report reminds me of a similar reaction made by environmental groups to a speech made in 2006 by Jim Connaughton, one of President Bush’s key environmental advisors.

Connaughton made his remarks to a 2006 Oregon State University salmon conference, 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.

Connaughton’s speech was immediately blasted by some environmental groups, who wanted the focus to remain on dams and irrigated agriculture, and not shift towards harvest impacts. I thought Connaughton’s comments provided 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.”

If our policy leaders really want to recover salmon – and not just satisfy a dam removal agenda – they should acknowledge the Columbia/Fraser report’s findings and work to focus even more efforts on understanding harvest impacts and the natural variability of runs caused by ocean and other conditions.