

from our
perspective

Shedding light on fish stories

The thrust of *The Oregonian's* June 24 editorial was that there are important decisions being made that affect salmon recovery and electricity costs in the Pacific Northwest, and that those decisions should be made transparently. We could not agree more.

The editorial suggests the Bonneville Power Administration was secretive when hydroelectric operations at Columbia River dams were altered April 3 to avoid potential reliability problems with the region's power supply. It's important to set the record straight on what took place that day and afterward.

To manage the region's hydroelectric facilities, federal agencies continually respond - 24/7 - to unpredictable fluctuations in water flows and production from other generating facilities as well as constantly changing temperatures and consumer demand. We also balance important environmental requirements as we strive to keep the lights on and keep rates as low as possible.

That was the case on April 3. A number of factors were at play, including errors in power forecasting and colder-than-expected temperatures, which caused an early-morning jump in electricity demand. Because BPA could not find additional energy sources to meet demand, operations were altered to boost power production. This choice was made to avoid creating a shortfall of electricity production that could have impacted human health and safety in the region. Generation turbines at three Lower Columbia dams were operated just outside of 1 percent efficiency for periods ranging between one and four hours.

It's important to note that while BPA has the authority to modify river operations to ensure the lights stay on, we do this only when extreme circumstances warrant. Consider that in 2006, the federal dam operators reported to the court that we implemented court-ordered spill operations consistent with



specifications correctly more than 99 percent of the time. Additionally, we never interrupted fish-related operations for the sake of increased power generation last year, even during the West Coast heat wave on July 24 that stretched the region's power supply to the limit. (*The Oregonian* reported about that critical situation this May.) Direction from the court is the law of the land, and we treat it as such.

The Oregonian stated that without the anonymous call to U.S. District Judge James Redden regarding the April 3 event, this situation would not have come to light. But here are the facts. Within hours of the incident, BPA followed established procedures and reported the alteration in hydro operations to federal fisheries agencies. The following day, BPA briefed the Technical Management Team, a group that provides environmental adaptive management input to Columbia River operations. This group includes federal and state fisheries interests in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana. Meetings are public, and representatives of tribes and the media often listen in.

Looking back, the April 3 event created an opportunity for federal agencies to consider what we could do better. We are developing additional procedures for our staff and others to respond to similar situations in the future. We're also considering ways we could improve the way we inform others when challenges arise.

As stewards of the federal hydro system, all the agencies involved are dedicated to doing our part to support salmon throughout their life cycle while maintaining a reliable energy system, protecting the region from floods and continuing to provide many other benefits to the Northwest. As more demands are placed on the hydro system from often competing interests, our goal to achieve balance between them becomes even more difficult.

— Stephen J. Wright is the Administrator and CEO of the Bonneville Power Administration