BPA pulls out all stoppers to reduce excess spill

Bonneville Power Administation

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PORTLAND, Ore – "The near-record streamflows we expect to see in the Columbia River this spring bring good news and bad news for fish," Bonneville Power Administrator Randy Hardy said today.

"The good news is, most of the streamflow targets required under the Endangered Species Act to help young fish migrate downstream will be easily met. The bad news is that, this year, like last, streamflows will create excess spill, which can harm fish," Hardy said.

The 1997 fish operation season begins April 10 and runs through August, which is the period that Columbia Basin salmon are migrating to the ocean. The 1997 spring runoff is projected to be near the largest on record for the Snake River, and in the top 10 of the historical record for the Columbia River. Spilling water over a dam's spillway can help young fish get past the dams, Hardy said. But too much water spilling over a dam increases levels of dissolved gas in the water, which can cause problems in fish similar to the bends in human divers. With this year's high flows, controlling excess spill will be a crucial part of fish operations. BPA is prepared to do everything feasible to do just that.

"We learned a lot last year about what works to reduce excess spill," Hardy said. "We're doing everything that worked last year, and trying new ideas, too."

One way to reduce excess spill is to increase the demand for energy so more water is run through the turbines. BPA expects to have all available turbines completely loaded on weekdays, and is aggressively seeking uses for power at night and on weekends, when electricity use is typically low. The agency is currently working with utilities from Alberta, Canada to Arizona to find other opportunities.

One important step yet to resolve is intertie capacity for this spring and summer. The high voltage power lines that connect the Northwest and California power systems have been operating at reduced capacity in the wake of major outages last summer. BPA is working with the Western Systems Coordinating Council to complete a series of studies that may recommend restoring most, if not all, of the capacity of these lines in time for the fish season.

"We hope that the intertie will be restored to near its full 7,900 megawatt capability for the spring and summer. If not, there may be periods in which energy may need to be spilled because we can't export it out of the region," Hardy said. "This could have very serious consequences for fish."

When excess spill is inevitable, BPA will, as it did last year, provide power at no cost to other Northwest utilities that can spill at their dams to spread higher gas levels around the region and away from migrating fish.

Last year, utilities accepted anywhere from 200 megawatts to 1,500 megawatts of electricity to reduce spill. (As a point of comparison, Bonneville Dam has a generating capacity of 1,147 megawatts.) This year, even more utilities are participating in the program.

Other actions to reduce excess spill include:

- The Washington Public Power Supply System WNP-2 nuclear plant, for which BPA markets power, will be shut down until excess spill is no longer a concern.
- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been working hard to make sure as many turbines as possible are in service throughout the downstream fish migration. Only five units out of the 98 in key dams will be out of service this year.
- BPA has arranged to sell power at very low cost to some utilities to shut down their thermal power plants and use federal hydropower instead through the fish passage season, and is still negotiating with other utilities.
- BPA is working with the State of Idaho to investigate removing some water from the river and running it through the Snake River aquifer.

Despite everything the region is doing to reduce excess spill, there still may be periods where excess spill will be unavoidable.

"The volume of water this spring will completely overwhelm the capacity of the generating system, even if all turbines were on line and running flat-out," Hardy said. "We've been working with the Corps, Bureau of Reclamation and others all winter to minimize unwanted spill this spring. We're prepared and ready to do all we can. Many spill-reduction steps are in place. Others are still being negotiated. The effort will continue throughout the high runoff."

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