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Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. – Adult salmon are returning to Columbia and Snake river spawning sites this year in numbers far exceeding last year's count. In some areas, twice as many salmon as last year are showing up to spawn. And while no one can say for sure why the numbers are up, state and federal agencies are working together to ensure there is plenty of water, and spawning habitat, waiting for them.

BPA on Thursday increased flows from Bonneville Dam so endangered Chum salmon returning to spawn have access to all available spawning habitat. The Chum salmon spawning season is expected to peak by the end of the month.

"The La Niña weather pattern has provided a lot of Northwest precipitation and water in the river to allow us to provide this level of flow below Bonneville Dam," said Therese Lamb, BPA's power and operations planning manager. "We've been working closely with the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state fish and wildlife managers to provide adequate flows for spawning while ensuring that we do not jeopardize our 1995 and 1998 Biological Opinion requirements."

BPA increased flows to 160,000 cubic feet per second, an increase of 15,000 cfs over the previous week's flows. The increase was executed in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the dam. In addition to increasing the amount of spawning habitat, releasing more water raises the river level high enough to keep existing redds (salmon nests) submerged.

Yesterday's increase follows a series of earlier flow adjustments that began on Oct. 4 to accommodate both listed and non listed salmon spawning.

On Oct. 1, state fish and wildlife agencies asked BPA to increase flows below Bonneville Dam to 125,000 cubic feet per second. In that request, the state fish and wildlife agencies outlined three "terraces" of spawning habitat. The first terrace is made available to the fish when flows out of Bonneville are 125,000 cubic feet per second. The second terrace is available at 145,000 cfs. And the last terrace is available at 160,000 cfs. With the flows provided out of Bonneville beginning yesterday, all usable spawning habitat has been made available.

BPA is a federal agency, under the U.S. Department of Energy, that markets wholesale hydroelectric power from the 29 federal dams in the Columbia River Basin. BPA owns and operates about three-quarters of the Pacific Northwest's total transmission capacity. BPA customers include publicly owned and investor-owned utilities, as well as some large industries.

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