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Smart thinking creates new way to protect spawning habitat

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Bonneville Power Administration

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The Bonneville Power Administration and the Northwest Power Planning Council today announced that they have successfully worked with livestock operators to remove livestock grazing on 48,000 acres of federal rangeland along Elk Creek in Bear Valley, Idaho. The Shoshone-Bannock Tribe/Idaho Department of Fish and Game proposed the mitigation project to protect threatened and endangered spring/summer chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout.

"This is a novel approach to protecting salmon, and we're pleased with this project," said Judi Johansen, BPA administrator. "The project promises to deliver on its goal of permanently protecting prime spawning habitat. This project demonstrates what is possible when people work together to develop creative solutions. We recognize this project represents a major change in the way of life for the local rancher, Rollin Baker, and we appreciate his willingness to work with us to make this happen."

"We are very pleased that the Bonneville Power Administration, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and Rollin Baker, the local ranchers have been able to successfully turn an innovative idea into reality," said Dave Rittenhouse, forest supervisor for the Boise National Forest. "These folks have worked closely together for several

years to find a fair way to improve conditions for the several species of threatened and endangered native fish that spawn in the Bear Valley area."

Elk Creek provides drainage for the Bear Valley Basin in Central Idaho. Nearly 50,000 acres of wild federal lands in this area provide habitat for a major population of native spring/summer chinook salmon. Elk Creek has particular significance for chinook salmon recovery. During the past 10 years, it has produced more than one third of the Middle Fork Salmon River's annual population of salmon. The Middle Fork Salmon River contains the only remaining stock of wild spring chinook, unaltered by hatchery supplementation, in the entire Snake River Basin.

Idaho Fish and Game and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe in 1999 proposed the project in which BPA would compensate livestock permittees for retiring or giving up their grazing permits. The Northwest Power Planning Council recommended the project as a high priority for funding. After rigorous review, their Independent Scientific Review Panel said the project "...is an excellent proposal. It emphasizes the protection and passive restoration of habitat and supports its points with data."

BPA paid \$145,000 to compensate grazing permittees for giving up their grazing privileges on the allotment. This allowed the Forest Service to close this area to future grazing. The amount of this compensation was based on a qualified appraisal of the value that the federal grazing permits add to the ranching operations. The land will continue to be held by the federal government.

"This is an unconventional approach that will work," said Larry Cassidy, chairman of the four-state Northwest Power Planning Council. "It is a very cost-effective investment we are making on behalf of our ratepayers. This project guarantees improvements in this important area."

The project reduces the tremendous costs – to both the rancher and the Forest Service – of running a cattle operation near sensitive salmon habitats including the costs of mitigation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting results.

"Livestock grazing is a viable use of rangelands on the Boise National Forest," Rittenhouse said. "We believe that we can manage livestock grazing and meet the diversity of resource needs on the forest including improving habitat for threatened and endangered species. However, we are willing to examine future proposals on a case-by-case basis to determine if further application of this approach is appropriate. As was the case with Elk Creek, the willingness of a cooperative permittee is mandatory for this approach to be successful."

This project focuses on one aspect of the regional recovery effort. Habitat restoration is important in the recovery cycle, but efforts must continue to be made in all the Hs – hydro operations, harvest practices, hatchery operations and habitat restoration – to achieve a truly comprehensive recovery.

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