



Salmon to get limited spill in May when it does the most good

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Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. – Endangered salmon and steelhead will get some additional help this month despite the drought. The Bonneville Power Administration announced today that a limited spill will begin tonight to help juvenile endangered salmon and steelhead travel downstream to the ocean. Spill refers to passing water through spillways to help juvenile fish traverse dams safely as they head downstream. The spill will be on a targeted basis at Bonneville and The Dalles dams.

Earlier, federal officials had anticipated no spill this spring because of near-record low water. BPA had said it would not call for spill if it jeopardized the reliability of the region's federal hydropower system. However, a creative arrangement with Grant County Public Utility District, located in Washington state, would free up some water for spill in May while providing a back-up plan for power reliability if water volumes fall short later. The arrangement is subject to approval by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Under the proposed arrangement, if water conditions improve significantly between now and July, BPA should not need to call on the contingent exchange. But, if water conditions deteriorate further, the arrangement calls for Grant County PUD to forego a portion of its spill in the mid-Columbia in late spring or summer to generate power for BPA to replace foregone power as a result of the limited May spill. BPA would cover Grant's operations and maintenance costs of the power generation.

"We are trying to carry out a very difficult balancing act between the need to maintain a reliable power supply and the need to protect our endangered fish," BPA's Acting Administrator Stephen Wright said. "We are trying to find truly creative solutions, and we think this is one," Wright added.

Grant PUD's general manager, Don Godard, also said, "This agreement makes sense for listed fish and for energy consumers in the Northwest."

On Wednesday, BPA submitted a filing to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission that seeks authorization for the contingent spill exchange agreement with Grant PUD. BPA has asked for expedited approval based on support from the National Marine Fisheries Service and Grant PUD. In its own filing to FERC, Grant made it clear that the agreement depends on concurrence of the principal governmental agencies and tribes, specifically Washington Governor Gary Locke, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Northwest Power Planning Council and the Yakama Indian Nation.

BPA has decided to go ahead now with spill based on support from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Grant PUD and the states of Oregon and Washington. BPA's decision also reflects the urgency to capture an opportunity to help endangered fish. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, May is the premium month to spill at the Corps of Engineers' Lower Columbia River dams because peak numbers of endangered fish are migrating downstream during this month. Waiting to spill could reduce benefits to fish significantly.

"We're disappointed this couldn't be more, but, in view of this year's conditions, we're glad to get at least some protection for ESA-listed fish," said Brian Brown of the National Marine Fisheries Service. "It hasn't been easy, and we appreciate how hard all of the players worked to allow this to happen."

Wright said that a number of elements played into BPA's decision to move ahead with spill. "We had to evaluate a number of risks. We had to ensure the reliability of the Northwest's power supply and the financial viability of the agency. The proposed deal with Grant PUD should allow limited spill now without leaving the system worse off in terms of reliability."

Grant owns and operates Priest Rapids and Wanapum dams in central Washington under a license from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The PUD dams have a generating capacity of 2,000 megawatts, and are currently spilling about 50 percent of the river flow to protect young migrants, including listed spring chinook salmon and

steelhead. Lon Topaz, Grant PUD's director of resource management, said, "We need the endorsement of the tribes and FERC before Grant PUD can deliver on this agreement. If there is consensus, Grant will go ahead as planned."

Under the spill regime, the equivalent of 300 megawatt's of electricity will be spilled in May, less than one-third the amount called for in NMFS' Biological Opinion, which assumes more normal conditions. The spill regime equals 30 percent of flow at The Dalles Dam, and 50,000 cubic feet per second of spill at Bonneville Dam, each for 24 hours a day for a period of approximately three weeks.

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