news release!

NORTHWEST POWER PLANNING COUNCIL • 851 S.W. Sixth • Suite 1100 • Portland, Oregon 97204

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FINAL VOTE SET ON PROTECTING CRITICAL HABITAT FROM HYDROELECTRIC DEVELOPMENT

The Northwest Power Planning Council expects to vote on what has been described as the most sweeping administrative proposal to protect fish and wildlife in the United States at its August 10-11 meeting at Cavanaugh's Motor Inn in Kalispell, Montana. The action follows years of data collection and months of public comment focused on a proposal to designate roughly 40,000 miles of Northwest rivers and streams as areas that should be protected from future hydroelectric development.

The designation would cover only areas of streams (reaches) with critical habitat for salmon and steelhead, as well as for non-seagoing fish and wildlife. Such habitat includes those areas with important spawning and rearing beds and migratory routes for fish. For wildlife, the designation refers to habitat for critically important or endangered wildlife that could be affected by hydroelectric development.

The Council's proposal is part of its efforts to rebuild valuable Northwest fish and wildlife populations harmed by hydroelectric development. These efforts have been undertaken as a result of a charge from the U.S. Congress and the Northwest states. The Northwest Power Act of 1980 (PL96-501) directed the Council to develop "a program to protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife, including related spawning grounds and habitat" which have been affected by hydroelectric development in the Columbia River Basin.

Hydroelectric dams have blocked passage for fish, while reservoirs created by the dams have flooded habitat for both fish and wildlife. The Council estimates that currently annual salmon and steelhead runs are about 15 percent of what they had been a century ago, and that about three-quarters of the losses are due to hydroelectric development.

Last October, the Council released a staff issue paper on the subject calling for public comment. In April, the Council voted to begin considering the proposal as a formal amendment to both its *Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program* and to its *Northwest Power Plan*. While the fish and wildlife program covers the Columbia Basin, the power plan extends to the entire states of Idaho, Oregon and Washington and to Montana west of the Continental Divide. The power plan calls for development of only those new resources that have acceptable environmental impacts.

Hearings on the proposal were held throughout the Northwest, and public comment was taken through July 8. Over 2,000 individuals and organizations submitted comments, the large majority endorsing the protected areas proposal or calling for even more stringent standards.

The proposal has been characterized by some parties as a "ban on dams," but the Council's chairman, Morris Brusett of Montana, says the proposal would also help developers. "Our intent is to focus developers on areas where they can safely build projects. The areas designated for protection represent only a small portion of the Northwest's streams, less than 20 percent. By knowing where development is possible without serious environmental consequences, the Northwest will have a far more accurate assessment of what its hydropower potential is, which will help significantly in energy planning."

In its comments on the proposal, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which licenses nonfederal hydroelectric projects, praised the Council's action for providing valuable guidelines to FERC in its decision-making.

Background

Six years ago, the Council began a process to identify areas where further development would have substantial and irreversible adverse effects on fish and wildlife. The areas proposed for protection are based on information gathered from several sources by the Council, working with the Bonneville Power Administration, the four Northwest states, the region's Indian tribes and other interested parties. This information was used to develop data bases for anadromous (ocean-migrating) fish, resident fish, wildlife and hydropower potential in the region.

The data base list, which indicates which stream reaches would fall inside the protected areas and the reason's for their designation, was distributed for public comment in May. Based on the comment, revisions were circulated in July for further comment.

Effects of protected areas designations

While the Council cannot prohibit development, the Northwest Power Act requires the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to take the Council's fish and wildlife program for the Columbia Basin into account in its decision-making (for project licenses) "to the fullest extent practicable." Furthermore, the Act obligates the Bonneville Power Administration to act in "a manner consistent" with the Council's fish and wildlife measures for the basin.

The Council's power plan also guides the Bonneville Power Administration's resource acquisitions throughout the Northwest. Under the proposal, the Council calls for Bonneville to refrain from acquiring hydropower from proposed or new projects in protected areas and recommends that Bonneville deny access to its intertie lines for development in such areas. (The intertie is the transmission system over which power is moved to California.) FERC also considers the Council's power plan in decisions for projects outside the Columbia Basin, but within the Northwest.

The proposed amendments would apply only to new hydropower projects, not to existing dams. A new hydropower project would be a new structure containing hydroelectric facilities for which the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has not issued a license. Existing water rights, water appropriations or jurisdiction over water would not be affected by the Council's decision. Nor would the amendments alter or conflict with any interstate compact made by the states.

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