
backgrounder

NORTHWEST POWER PLANNING COUNCIL

Protected areas study

At this meeting, the Council will be hearing public comment on an issue paper that summarizes the history and findings of the Council's protected areas study.

What is the issue

The "protected areas" issue refers to designating certain Northwest streams and fish and wildlife habitats as protected--that is, closed to future hydroelectric development--because of the potential impacts on fish and wildlife in those areas. An estimated 35 percent of the anadromous (ocean-migrating) fish habitat in the Columbia River Basin has already been lost due to existing hydroelectric development. The Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation continue to plan for future federal projects, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which licenses private and non-federal public hydropower projects, has at least 200 applications pending throughout the Northwest.

History of the issue

Through the Northwest Power Act of 1980, Congress directed the Northwest Power Planning Council to develop a program to "protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife, including related spawning grounds and habitat" in the Columbia River Basin. Because the program is funded by ratepayers, the Council was to address its efforts to the impacts of hydroelectric development. As the Council developed the original *Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program*, several parties, particularly fish and wildlife agencies and Indian tribes, urged the Council to protect fish and wildlife from future development as well as past and existing development. The Council agreed that protecting certain areas was important, but felt that uniform criteria for protection needed to be developed. Therefore, the Council approached the states to identify potential hydropower sites, assess their values for fish and wildlife, and develop criteria for designating which sites should be protected.

Benefits of protected areas

The benefits of providing protected areas are to: 1) ensure that the substantial Northwest ratepayer investments to rehabilitate fish and wildlife in the Columbia Basin are not undermined by new projects; 2) provide clear signals to potential developers on the importance of fish and wildlife resources and help focus on sites with fewer resource conflicts; and 3) provide useful information to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission so that its hydropower licensing decisions reflect the Northwest's interest in quality resource development and environmental protection.

Who participated in the study

Participants in the study included the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington; the Columbia Basin Indian tribes; the Bonneville Power Administration; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; hydroelectric project operators; and recreational and environmental groups.

Current status (and schedule) of the issue

Using the data developed by the study, the Northwest states have made recommendations for preserving certain stretches of streams in each state. The Council has published an issue paper on the subject and is calling for public comment on the alternative proposals for these designations, as well as on the overall issue of whether areas should be designated for protection. The written comment period runs through January 15, 1988, and oral testimony will be taken at each monthly Council meeting during this period. The Council is also meeting with interested groups on the subject. After considering this comment, in February the Council is expected to make a decision on whether or not it will enter into rulemaking (the process by which it amends its fish and wildlife program) to consider designating protected areas. If the Council enters rulemaking, it will provide a new public comment period and will hold hearings in each state before it makes a final decision.

Proposed alternatives for protected areas

The proposed alternatives include: 1) protect all areas currently used or potentially usable by anadromous (ocean-migrating) fish in the Columbia Basin; 2) protect all areas currently used by anadromous fish in the Northwest outside the Columbia Basin; 3) protect the Northwest's high-quality resident fish and wildlife both inside and outside the basin; and 4) provide for re-evaluation of protected areas after the Council has completed its basinwide plan to double current salmon and steelhead populations. The plan will explore each of 31 subbasins to determine its potential for increasing salmon and steelhead.

Potential impacts on hydropower

The proposed criteria would reduce the region's future hydropower potential by about 431 average megawatts based on the hydroelectric projects currently being proposed or considered for licensing before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. This would reduce the hydroelectric capability by about 50 percent (based on the assumption that all currently proposed projects would have been developed, which is unlikely).

Relationship to specific development projects

The study was "project blind." That is, in determining potential protected areas (sites that posed threats to fish and wildlife), the study looked at river reaches, not specific projects. It was only after a river reach was evaluated for its value as fish and wildlife habitat, that any specific proposed hydroelectric projects were identified as being in a corresponding river reach.

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