

The Washington Post

JUNE 23, 2005

Senator Aims to Kill Agency That Tracks Salmon

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SEATTLE, June 23 -- Angered by a federal court order that spills water over federal dams to save endangered salmon in the Pacific Northwest, Sen. Larry E. Craig (R-Idaho) has inserted language into a Senate energy bill that would kill an agency that keeps score on the survival of fish as they swim through the heavily dammed Columbia and Snake rivers.

The federal government has spent far more money trying to prevent the extinction of Northwest salmon than it has on any other endangered species. Craig's move would eliminate the Fish Passage Center, which for more than two decades has been collecting and analyzing data that document how effective that multibillion-dollar federal effort has been.

A spokesman for the Idaho senator calls the rider -- attached to an energy appropriations bill that moved last week to the Senate floor -- "a shot across the bow" to challenge what Craig believes is an agency that advocates a "controversial and one-sided" approach to salmon recovery.

"Power rates are going up, we think ratepayers ought to have some answers for how their money is being spent," said Sid Smith, a spokesman for Craig. The Northwest depends more on hydroelectric dams for power than any other part

of the country.

The manager of the Fish Passage Center, Michele DeHart, said her staff collects "data that is accurate and, yes, it does show that the federal hydro system kills fish."

The federal court order that requires summer spill over dams in the Snake River means that some of the electricity that could be generated by those dams is being forgone -- at an estimated cost of about \$67 million over the three summer months. Much of the data on fish survival that supported the order, which was made last month by a federal judge in Portland and has been appealed by the Bush administration, was gathered and analyzed by the Fish Passage Center.

"Maybe this is one of those deals where when you don't like the message, you kill the messenger," DeHart said.

At the heart of the dispute over salmon is a disagreement about how to increase their survival as they negotiate federal dams that have transformed the Snake and Columbia from the world's premier salmon highway to a series of slow-moving lakes separated by huge slabs of concrete.

Indian tribes, many state fish biologists, fishing organizations and environmental groups say the best way to increase survival is to keep the fish in the rivers while increasing their flow during migration

months and spilling water over dams. These groups have long supported the Fish Passage Center, which has published many reports calling for more spill and increased flow -- programs that can cost millions of dollars by reducing electricity generation and disrupting irrigation and river transport.

"We all have to rely on some mutually agreeable data in order to figure out what is happening to the fish and, to date, that has come from the Fish Passage Center," said Charles Hudson, a spokesman for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

On the other side, are federal agencies that built the dams and sell the power, along with irrigation, barging and utility interests that depend on the dammed-up Columbia and Snake for their livelihood. Their side has received considerable support from the Bush administration, which concluded last year that federal dams should be viewed as part of an "environmental baseline" when it comes to saving salmon. U.S. District Judge James Redden rejected that analysis this month, saying that it was made "more in cynicism than in sincerity."

The Bush administration did not help initiate the rider to stop funding the Fish Passage Center and had no comment on the proposal, according to Brian Gorman, a spokesman in Seattle for the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Hydropower interests generally support taking salmon out of the river and transporting them around the dams, an approach that allows maximum electricity production without interrupting river barging or irrigation. They also have been denouncing DeHart and the Fish Passage Center for years, accusing her and her staff of releasing distorted and inaccurate information.

None of these accusations, however, has been documented, according to Melinda Eden, chairman of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, a group that oversees the operation of the Fish Passage Center. At the request of the council, an independent panel of scientists studied the integrity and value of the center's work two years ago and recommended continued financial support.

"We have been asking for years for people with hard evidence of irregularities [in the fish data] to step up, and nobody has brought a single piece of concrete evidence," Eden said.

The Fish Passage Center gets its money from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), which sells electricity produced by federal dams in the Northwest. Stephen J. Wright, administrator of the BPA, said through a spokesman that he would neither fight for the survival of the Fish Passage Center nor work to eliminate it. He said, though, the BPA does need data about fish and is willing to pay for it.

BPA spending on the Fish Passage Center began after passage in 1980 of the Northwest Power Act, a law that requires that federal dams be operated in a way that places salmon "on a par" with power, navigation and irrigation.

The rider that bans funding for the Fish Passage Center will have to get through a House-Senate conference and be signed by President Bush before BPA can hold back the money.