

Colonel Jose Aguilar, Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
P.O. Box 2946
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February 9, 2016

Re: Request for emergency measures to reduce fish mortality caused by hot water discharges from Snake and Columbia dams

Commander Aguilar,

The undersigned organizations, on behalf of their thousands of respective members, hereby request immediate formulation, adoption, and implementation of emergency actions to significantly increase survival rates of adult salmon and steelhead migrating upriver through Columbia and Snake River dams and reservoirs during annual mid-summer periods of high water temperature in 2016 and beyond.

Summer 2015 was a disaster for salmon – and a disturbing glimpse at the possible future of Columbia and Snake River fisheries. The Army Corps’ dams and reservoirs warmed the Columbia and Snake rivers enough to create impassable temperature barriers (sustained in excess of 20° C and recorded as high as 26.2° C) for adult salmon migrating upriver. Last July, reports emerged that more than 250,000 sockeye returning from the ocean had died as a result of high water temperatures in the Columbia and Snake rivers. At the time, NOAA estimated 80% of the 500,000 returning sockeye could ultimately perish that summer. The end result was worse: 96% of returning ESA listed Snake River sockeye died before reaching Lower Granite Dam.

The Army Corps’ inability to protect returning adult salmon from high water temperatures caused the unauthorized “take” of ESA-listed Snake River sockeye in 2015; similar fish kills in 2016 or 2017 could push Snake River sockeye to the brink of extinction and erase progress made to recover this distinct population segment.

While the drivers of salmon decline and recovery are complex, 2015 demonstrated the undeniable need for emergency measures to protect returning adult salmon from water temperatures exceeding 20° C for extended periods. The Fish Passage Center’s recent report made key findings regarding the 2015 fish kills:

- 96% of adult Snake River sockeye that reached Bonneville Dam in 2015 died without passing over Lower Granite Dam.
- “[E]levated water temperatures in the Columbia and Snake rivers, including adult fishways, is a long-recognized problem that to date remains largely unmitigated.”

- “Fish ladders often expose migrating adult [salmon] to the highest temperatures and thermal stress encountered in the hydrosystem, due to warm surface water used for ladder flow.”
- “[Fish] ladders that use warm surface waters that flow into a cooler tailrace have a high thermal gradient, which affects migration through the ladders.”
- In 2015, adult Snake River sockeye that had been trucked or barged downriver as juveniles died at significantly higher rates when migrating upstream than adult fish that had migrated in-river as juveniles.

Hot weather periods similar to 2015 can be reasonably expected to reoccur in the near future. NOAA predicts that weather conditions during the first quarter of 2016 will be similar to 2015: rapid snowmelt and early run-off which, combined with higher than normal ambient temperatures, will result in low flows characterized by above-average water temperatures that endanger salmon survival. Anticipating and preparing a course of action is essential, and justifies immediate implementation of measures to prevent a repeat of the 2015 fish kills in the event of similar conditions in Summer 2016.

In light of these findings and the unambiguous need for measures to mitigate this likelihood, the Army Corps must identify emergency measures to prevent future fish kills of adult salmon and steelhead due to hot water.

If the Army Corps fails to adopt and implement emergency measures, it risks causing further massive fish kills, unauthorized take, failure of mandatory legal duties to protect endangered species, and jeopardizing the continued existence of the Snake and Columbia rivers’ salmon and steelhead populations in 2016 and future years.

The undersigned organizations request a meeting with Army Corps officials and an explanation of emergency measures that the Army Corps will implement in 2016 to protect ESA-listed salmon and steelhead.

Respectfully;

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Washington State Governor Jay Inslee

Oregon State Governor Kate Brown

Idaho State Governor Butch Otter

Montana Governor Steve Bullock

NW U.S. Senators

NW U.S. Representatives

Columbia River Basin Tribes (via the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission)

Secretary Sally Jewell, U.S. Department of the Interior

Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz, U.S. Department of Energy

Secretary Penny Pritzker, U.S. Department of Commerce

Commanding General and Chief of Engineers Lieutenant General Thomas P. Bostick,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Administrator Gina McCarthy, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Administrator Elliott Mainzer, Bonneville Power Administration

Director Shaun Donovan, Office of Management and Budget