

Northwest Power and Conservation Council's Draft 2026 Fish and Wildlife Program Plan

Note: Below find suggested talking points and related information that may be of help as you prepare written comments to the Council regarding its draft 2026 Fish and Wildlife Program.

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council (Council) updates its Fish and Wildlife Program every five years. This program prescribes to the Bonneville Power Administration and Corps of Engineers how to operate the Columbia/Snake River hydro system in a manner favorable to salmon and steelhead. Those operations significantly impact juvenile salmon and steelhead survival on their outward migration and the return of adult fish enroute to their spawning grounds.

Three options exist for those who provide comments to the Council:

1. Making a cookie cutter talking points response

Most of the major salmon conservation organization websites contain recommended talking points from which you can extract key messages. This is a quick and easy approach requiring minimal effort on your part.

2. Providing factual support for your recommendations

Rather than limiting your comments to specific recommendations, you can include the reasons behind your position, the “why” of your argument.

3. Challenging the claims of supporters of the status quo on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers.

We know most of the false claims some dam supporters frequently make to mislead the public. If you want to increase the impact of your comments, rebut these false claims.

Several conservation groups make these three key recommendations:

A. Increase spill as proposed in the draft plan.

1. Increase spill at the four lower Snake River dams to the 125% gas cap, 24 hours per day April 1-August 31.
2. Expand spill operations at the four lower Columbia River dams as proposed.

Why? Compared with traveling *through* dams (turbines), or around dams (*fish passage systems*), the least amount of loss of migrating juvenile salmon occurs when these fish are carried *over a spillway*—thus the need for increased spill. Spilling water increases the nitrogen content of the water which can damage juvenile salmon, and hence the nitrogen gas cap at 125% saturation.

Challenge: Dam supporters state that the survival rate for juvenile fish passing a dam is 95%. They rarely acknowledge that the cumulative rate over 8 dams would then be survival of 66%. However, their position completely ignores the heavy losses in reservoirs due to predation.

Based on “studies by the fish and wildlife agencies and hydropower project operators,” the Council has identified the estimated losses of juvenile salmon traveling through the 8-dam system, concluding that an *optimistic* average dam/reservoir survival rate is 80%. Applying that rate, the Council thus estimates that only 16.8% of juvenile salmon survive their journey from the beginning of slack water at Lewiston, Idaho to the Bonneville dam’s tailrace (the flow on the low water side of a dam). Below Bonneville, the juveniles further suffer what scientists call “delayed mortality,” succumbing to the various injuries they earlier received from dam passages. Scientific estimates of delayed mortality range from 24%-76%. Using the lower figure, we can then expect that for every 1,000,000 juvenile salmon that enter the 8-dam gauntlet, only 127,680 smolts will reach the ocean.

B. Increase river flows, decrease daily flow fluctuations, and maintain minimum operating pool during the bulk of the juvenile migration period.

Why? Juvenile salmon survival improves with faster water transit times, which better match the pace of physical changes the juveniles’ bodies are undergoing and decreases the amount of exposure to fish and bird predation. Less expansive reservoir surfaces also absorb less radiant heat, a major pollutant that can have devastating consequences for both juvenile and adult salmon. Daily fluctuations also disturb mainstem spawning and rearing habitat.

Challenge claims of possible widespread financial failure for farmers who barge their wheat to the west coast and object to minimum operating pool. Over 75% of the wheat exported from Washington and Oregon ports arrives by rail. When container-on-barge transportation shut down on the Columbia and lower Snake in 2015, pulse farmers (lentils, dry peas, garbanzos) switched to rail and have clearly survived; when the Army Corps of Engineers closes the river for up to 15 weeks every few years for major lock repairs, wheat farmers ship their product by rail.

C. Incorporate lower Snake River dam breaching into the Council’s planning.

Why?

- Over the past 30+ years, the federal government has been sued six times for not sufficiently protecting threatened and endangered Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead. The government has lost every time. The government then makes minor adjustments to the operations of the dams, and the fish continue to decline.
- Over \$20 Billion ratepayer and taxpayer dollars have been spent on Columbia/Snake River salmon recovery; none of the 13 Columbia/Snake threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead species has recovered. In fact, Snake River T & E salmon and steelhead continue their slide toward extinction. In 2020, forty-two percent of Snake Basin wild/natural origin spring/summer chinook populations were at or below quasi-extinction levels; seventy-seven percent of these populations were predicted to hit this critical semi-extinction level by 2025.
- Power production at the four lower Snake River dams has declined from a 2000-2021 average of 936 Megawatts to an average of just 669 Megawatts over the last 5 years (2021-2025}. Increased spill, along with climate change and turbines well past their design life, will predictably result in further declines. Presumably, the lower Snake River dams would not be breached all in the same year. Using current data, the loss of power from breaching a single dam would be approximately 167 Megawatts, or just 6/10th of 1 percent of Bonneville Power’s estimated Pacific Northwest electricity load.

- Snake River threatened and endangered adult salmon and steelhead numbers are abysmal. Spring/summer chinook over the last few years averaged around 10,00 fish, with historical numbers estimated at 1,000,000 and a recovery goal of 138,000. Historic numbers for steelhead are an estimated 600,000, with a goal of 112,500 and current numbers around 14,500. Snake River sockeye salmon are on life support. With historic levels of 84,000 fish and a recovery goal of 9,000, recent years have witnessed around 25-50 fish.
- Keeping the lower Snake River dams in place causes numerous costs to Pacific Northwest citizens often not well recognized by the public. For example, the continued loss of 14,000 acres of land and 280 miles of prime riparian wildlife habitat; the loss through evaporation of an estimated 30,400 acre feet (9.9 Billion gallons) of water from the reservoirs behind the lower Snake dams; the continued violation of Native American treaty rights.*

Without lower Snake River dam breaching, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council cannot achieve its goal of an annual 5 million salmonids across Bonneville dam. Fifty-eight Pacific Northwest fish scientists have stated unequivocally that threatened and endangered Snake River salmon and steelhead will not recover without breaching the lower Snake River dams. NOAA Fisheries agrees with this position, as does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Failure to address the need to breach the lower Snake River dams leaves a gaping hole in the Northwest Power and Conservation Council's Fish and Wildlife Plan.

You can find links leading to the Northwest Council's comments process here:

Columbia Snake River Campaign <https://columbiasnakeriver.com/npcc>

Save Our Wild Salmon <https://www.wildsalmon.org/news-and-media/sos-blog/npcc-fish-and-wildlife-program.html>

Or other NGO's with campaigns to save Snake River salmon and steelhead from extinction.

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* For a list of additional losses see the attached *Costs of Keeping the Lower Snake River dams in Place*, July 2025.