Salmon Recovery Groups Asking Courts to Shake Things Up

Local News

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Portland, OR - An offer to try something new and different is on the table for restoring endangered salmon.

The state of Oregon and salmon-recovery interests want a settlement judge appointed, a step they say could improve discussions. The federal government has rejected the offer, noting that current habitat projects already are improving salmon survival rates at dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers - something salmon advocates dispute.

Bill Arthur, Sierra Club national field director, is disappointed by the feds' decision.

"What we do know is that just repeating the same failed process for the fifth time in a row won't get the job done, and that's why most of the organizations have asked to convene a stakeholder process."

The Bonneville Power Administration issued a news release stating that its approach to habitat projects is supported by independently developed scientific information which documents benefits to fish - and that it's focusing on all aspects of fish survival.

The State of Oregon had joined the request for a settlement process.

Although the current federal approach of habitat improvements has seen some success, Brett Brownscombe, a policy adviser for the Oregon Governor's Natural Resources Office, says more than tweaks are needed to meet court-ordered changes.

"An approach is needed that focuses on outcomes through a process that addresses not just habitat mitigation, but the other key issues and interests around this region related to operation of the Columbia dams and reservoirs."

A settlement process would involve all sides to work toward solutions, Arthur says. He says that means listening to the commercial and recreational fishermen, tribes, barge workers, farmers, and taxpayer advocacy groups, among others.

"Actually sit down doing the hard work, and taking a serious look at what's going to really be needed to recover the salmon and to deal responsibly with the communities and other affected parties."

U.S. District Judge James Redden has ordered parties in the lawsuit to collaborate on ways to improve the federal salmon plan, which was ruled "illegal." The Sierra Club and the state of Oregon are plaintiffs in the case. The judge is expected to issue a decision on the request for a settlement judge in the coming weeks.