

Aging Dams Pose Challenges for Fish and Feds

Local News

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Burbank, WA - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is testing the oil used in electrical equipment at dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers to see if contains polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), chemicals that can contaminate the water around the dams. It says the tests are a precaution after oil leaks were discovered in December at the Ice Harbor Lock and Dam on the Snake River.

That development brings up the bigger topic of the aging hydro-power system, with the Bonneville Power Administration predicting what it calls "significant new resource requirements for non-routine extraordinary" dam maintenance.

Bert Bowler, a retired fish biologist and founder of Snake River Salmon Solutions, says that isn't surprising, with dams at an average age nearing 50 years.

As these dam projects age over time, sure, there'll be all kinds of issues with old equipment that will end up leaking oil and those kinds of issues associated with turbine units that, you know, go back to the early '60s. - Bert Bowler

PCBs were used in older transformers and other electrical equipment and were phased out starting in the 1970s because of harmful health effects. A common way people ingest these chemicals is by eating fish.

Advocates for Northwest salmon say oil leaks have become a chronic problem, another reason to consider decommissioning outdated dams.

The federal government operates 12 hydroelectric dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. Bonneville Power lists 41 maintenance projects for this year and next on Corps of Engineers-operated dams, 20 of them considered "high risk" if not funded.

Bowler says paying for those repairs is a major concern.

"They're in need of a lot of money to keep the system viable. I'm sure in times ahead, the federal government is not going to just be ponying up a whole bunch of money to keep this system viable without a substantial increase in contributions from the users."

He says the Obama administration wants to raise the user fees and add a lock fee to boost funds for lock and dam maintenance. But some in Congress see the fees as taxes and don't support them, while others say the growing costs are a signal to rethink using the Lower Snake River for shipping.

Dam maintenance information is from BPA's 2010 Integrated Program Review (IPR), www.bpa.gov.