

Transcript:
**Audio interviews of federal executives on
federal action agency proposals
for ESA-listed fish**
Sept. 6, 2007

Intro

“I’m Scott Simms of BPA Public Affairs, here today with BPA Administrator Steve Wright and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Northwestern Division Fish Program Manager Witt Anderson to talk about the federal agencies’ new proposal for fish recovery.”

Q1: Steve, tell us about the significance of the agencies’ filing with NOAA. If you’re a citizen of the Northwest, why should this matter?

A: (Steve) Well, I think this is a particularly significant filing because we are addressing two of the most important elements of the environmental and economic health of the region. First, we are addressing the future for Columbia Basin Salmon and Steelhead. And second, the operation of Federal dams in the Columbia and Snake rivers that provide low cost electricity, navigation, irrigation, recreation, and flood control to millions of people across this region.

Q2: So, the federal courts rejected the previous plans – what did you do to respond to the court with this plan?

A: (Steve) Well, I think there are three key things that we’ve done. First of all, we’ve done the most comprehensive analysis that we’ve ever done, trying to look at where the stocks are today and where they need to be. Second, we’ve gone through an extensive collaboration process with a variety of parties across the region, primarily states and tribes, to try to understand their interests and views about salmon recovery and operation of the Federal hydro-system. And at the end of all of that, we’ve added more actions, costing more money, that will ultimately help salmon and steelhead recovery in the region.

I want to take a second and just describe, in particular, the more comprehensive analysis. We’ve been spending tens of millions of dollars in this region for many years on research, monitoring and

evaluation. And what we've done with this analysis is use the most current data and looked at each at the individual populations that are listed as threatened and endangered, and then sub-populations that are in that – down to the tributary level. We started by updating the status: where are they today? We defined the limiting factors: what are the things that cause problems for them? And then we started adding actions that would meet or exceed the ESA standards established by the Federal courts. The actions are custom-tailored to the needs of the specific populations and sub-populations. And that kind of extensive analysis and then targeting actions to the specific needs of the fish is what is new about this biological assessment and proposed action we're putting on the table.

Q3: Let us turn to Witt here and Witt, maybe you can give some concrete examples of what you mean when we talk about this plan being "different"?

A: (Witt) This plan addresses all of the "H's" in addition to hydro-system affects. We address habitat issues, hatchery program needs, management of predators in the system - both fish and birds. For example, in the hydro arena we're committing approximately half a billion dollars of additional improvements to improve survival of juvenile fish as they migrate to the ocean and also passage for adult fish coming back from the ocean.

In the habitat arena, there is about \$450 million in increased funding over the 10-year period of this Biological opinion for expanded efforts in both tributaries and the Columbia River estuary.

In the hatchery arena, we have about \$34 million over two years for expanding and modifying existing facilities and another \$4 million dedicated to operations of facilities once the modifications are completed.

Lastly, in predator management, about \$7 million over the period of the Biological opinion for expanded efforts to reduce losses from fish predation, and also sea lions and birds.

Q4: So Witt, what's the next step from here? What happens after this has been filed with NOAA?

A: (Witt) Well, it's important to realize that the process is not complete as this point. While the action agencies have handed over proposed action to NOAA Fisheries, we are continuing conversations with many of the sovereign parties in the collaboration. The next step is NOAA prepares a draft biological opinion by October 31st (2007), per the court deadline. Judge Redden has indicated he will entertain a review period for the sovereign parties, and then after that NOAA Fisheries will prepare a final biological opinion sometime after the first of the calendar year. Again, there is a lot of opportunity for adjustment and fine-tuning as we proceed to the draft and the final opinions.

Q5: So Steve, when the whole thing is said and done, do you think the federal agencies will produce a plan the judge can support?

A: (Steve) Well, we've spent thousands of hours trying to understand and implement the Judge's orders working in collaboration with a lot of parties across this region and then we had to make decisions about what actions we were going to include. And we've included a robust set of actions that we think will make a substantial contribution to the recovery of these fish. So we believe that, given what the Judge told us back in 2004, that we've responded to that and we certainly hope that he will find it satisfactory.

Q6: Let me ask with the work of developing these plans and lots of folks working on that, what's happening out in river right now with fish recovery efforts?

A: (Witt) Well, in addition to the thousands of hours that we've been spending on this collaboration developing the new plan, we're continuing with tens of thousands of hours and actually hundreds of millions of dollars in investments annually in the system. For example, in the hydro-corridor alone the Corps of Engineers is installing surface passage for juvenile fish to improve their survival, and we've seen great success at the dams where we've installed those features to date. We just completed construction of a surface passage facility to install at Lower Monumental Dam this fall on the Snake River. We have similar features we're testing at McNary Dam

this summer. We've seen good success so we're continuing those kinds of investments.

A second example I would give you is that we have recently determined that we have both authority and the source of funding to carry out a management plan to further reduce predation by Caspian Terns in the estuary consistent with an EIS that was prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Corps of Engineers two years ago. And we expect that that action, which we will initiate this year and carry forth two years or so, will further reduce predation on juvenile salmon by several million smolts each year.

And there is a long list of other actions we could give as examples, but that work continues while we have been developing the new plan and NOAA goes through the biological opinion process.

Q7: Is there anything else you would like to add today that is important for folks to think about?

A: (Steve) I would underscore the importance of the collaborative approach. I think there is a wide array of folks in the region who are quite supportive of salmon recovery. The challenge has been that there are different views about how you would get there. The collaborative approach has been extremely helpful for us in trying to work through the different approaches and what makes the most sense given what the current data is.

While this particular phase of the development of this plan is now done, the collaboration is not done. We'll continue in collaboration with the states and the tribes in advance of the production of the final biological opinion that will set the ten-year plan. And then beyond that, this particular proposal commits to continuation of the collaboration process with regional parties for the ten years that are covered by the implementation of the plan – including regular reporting on implementation and progress throughout – that the parties will be able to comment on. And hopeful we'll be able to use adaptive management practices in order to make sure that we get the best actions in place as new data arises through term of the agreement.

So this is not a plan that is being imposed by the Federal government on the region. It is one that's been developed in collaboration with the region, and we intend to continue that collaboration throughout its implementation.

(Witt) I would just add to that as one of the participants in the policy workgroup of the sovereign collaboration of the last two years. In all of the meetings and times spent in that, it's noteworthy to me that most, if not all of the players in that process, have come and have participate. And – now that we are at the close of it – that they thought it really was the best process the region has implemented to develop a collaborative regional plan ever relative to salmon in the Columbia River. And they all seemed to indicate that it's worthwhile to continue the process in the future, as Steve said, to oversee the execution of this effort.

Scott Sims: We appreciate your time today. Thank you.

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