

READER FORUM

Idaho doesn't need a port

*Trains, trucks
can transport
grain and leave
river for fish*

It's time to quit wasting our money on the salmon and steelhead of the Columbia River. We should get on with the job of restoring these fish instead of window-dressing efforts intended to prolong government and ratepayer subsidies that run counter to everything in political rhetoric today.

We can do it. We can restore this emblem of the Northwest that once gave us 25,000 commercial fishing jobs. We can reinstate a fishery worth \$250 million to \$500 million a year. We can honor our treaties with the first Americans. We can allow a whole circle of life the

grace of living, and we can do it by saving money.

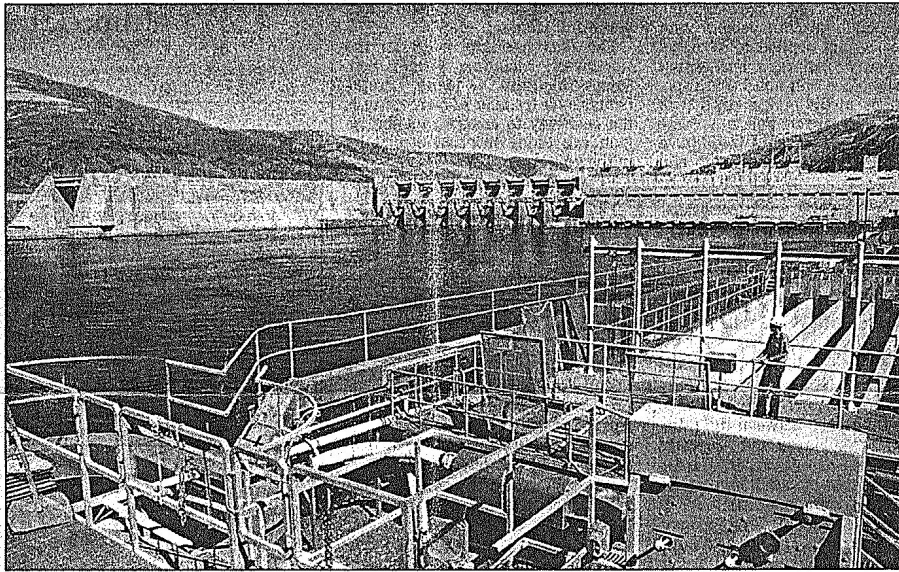
Here's the problem: The four lower Snake River dams pushed a healthy population of fish into a death-curve toward extinction. Before those final dams went up, commercial fishermen in Oregon and Washington still had jobs. Idaho still had a sport season on salmon — a huge economic event.

The final four dams, finished long after the era of economic dam building had ended, put living salmon in their tomb. Now it's time to let them out.

Let's face it. After a generation of unequivocal failure, the Army Corps of Engineers' approach of loading the fish onto boats and motoring them around the dams has led to nowhere but oblivion for salmon and steelhead, and it costs taxpayers \$98 million a year for "fish transport" alone. Meanwhile, the four dams provide only 4 percent of the region's electricity, an amount easily saved or replaced without driving the Northwest's symbol of life to extinction.

The political muscle for building these dams that even the corps ruled uneconomic came from one group — the businessmen of Lewiston, Idaho, who wanted the taxpayers to make their town, 465 miles inland, a seaport for commodities carried by barge. The barges' current allies in the aluminum, hydropower and agribusiness industries would scarcely be affected by dam retirement, except to get endangered species requirements off their backs.

You'd think that whatever is barged must be very important. Well, surplus grain bound for Asia is the main commodity in this fish-killing complex. The totally subsi-



TIM PALMER

Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River is a candidate for breaching to save salmon. Below, the Sunbeam Dam on the Salmon River below Stanley, Idaho, was breached in the 1930s to allow salmon passage to the headwater spawning areas.



dized bargeway delivers surplus crops to Japan, and that is why we are driving our own food source in salmon and steelhead to ruin.

The federally owned dams could be bypassed for \$75 million a year according to engineers hired by the corps. Instead, the BPA alone now pays up to \$400 million a year trying to counter the dam's unwanted effects that kill fish. Other costs are formidable.

Conservative economic projections say that taxpayers will save \$183 million a year by laying these four white elephants to rest.

The other dams and the hydro-power network can remain intact. Support that system by getting rid of the deadwood in the Snake River.

The economic pill of reform need

not be bitter. It will be far cheaper for the government to aid, in the economic transition than to continue: the subsidies. We could still barge from Pasco; only 4 million of the 38 million tons of commodities on the Columbia system are shipped above Pasco anyway. Trucks and rail can fill the gap.

Lewiston can be the biggest winner by upgrading from a fourth-class barge depot to a world-class fishing destination.

Most biologists agree that the fish will rebound if we return the river to a more natural condition. Those who doubt might refer to the foremost panel on the subject, the Independent Scientific Group of the Northwest Power Planning Council.

Bypassing the four dams is not

only the most certain means to bring back the fish, but also the easiest, cheapest way to tackle the job.

The generations and the politicians before us either lacked the knowledge or the will to choose the correct course of action for salmon and steelhead. Now we have the knowledge. A growing number of people have the will.

It's time for our leaders to look beyond the subsidies for their corporate constituents and, instead, save the taxpayers' money and fish, all at the same time.

Tim Palmer of Kelly, Wyo., is the author of "The Columbia: Sustaining a Modern Resource," "The Snake River: Window to the West," and other books.