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 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 the emblem of the Northwest that once gave us 26,000 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 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 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 $88 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 symbol of life to extinction.

The political muscle for building these dams that even the corps ruled unconomic 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 barges. The barges current allies in the aluminum, hydropower and agrribusiness industries would stand to 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 subsidized 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 EPA 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 $109 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 58 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.