

OBAMA BOTCHES SALMON RECOVERY

Sept. 15, 2009 Boise - Hope dimmed in the Pacific Northwest today when the Obama administration released an old salmon recovery plan redressed in new clothing.

"We appreciate that President Obama took the time to look at this, but we see little more than a veiled attempt to pass off the old Bush plan as a new one," said Greg Stahl, assistant policy director at Idaho Rivers United. "This is a president who promised decisions based on science and law, and Idaho salmon have yet to see any indication that he is doing that. We've got to get off this merry-go-round. Idaho salmon don't have another decade to spin in politically gerrymandered circles. Judge Redden said it in May, and we agree. Salmon need real recovery now."

The Obama administration announced this morning that it would follow a flawed 2008 salmon recovery plan, penned by the Bush administration, that fails to recover wild stocks of endangered Snake River salmon and steelhead. The 2008 plan has been widely criticized by scientists, a federal court and groups that are party to a federal lawsuit challenging the plan. The plaintiffs challenging the federal salmon plan, called a Biological Opinion, include 15 conservation and sport fishing organizations, the state of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho.

"What we see from the Obama administration today is a document that assumes recovery is underway, and that is not the case," said Tom Stuart, an IRU board member and an avid Idaho angler. "We're getting more hatchery fish back, but wild stocks are not improving. It looks like the Obama administration is trying to punt the hard decisions down the road. They've articulated some contingency plans, but it doesn't look like any specific contingency actions are on the table.

"The administration has not addressed, at all, the deficiencies in the jeopardy standard that Judge Redden indicated he wanted to see."

The administration's decision allows for a multi-year study at some point in the future of lower Snake River dam removal, and even then only if already depressed salmon numbers plunge even further.

"After two decades and more than \$8 billion spent, it's a wonder that the federal government can't create a scientifically credible biological opinion consistent with its responsibilities to uphold the basic tenets of the Endangered Species Act," Stahl said. "The ESA is very clear. It's not a popularity contest. Recovery plans must chart a course toward measurable recovery of a species. This plan, unfortunately, fails to do that for wild Snake River salmon and steelhead."

The administration at first gave every indication that it was going to do the right thing, and the president himself spoke of protecting scientific integrity, allowing science, not politics, to determine policy. Today, the administration is upholding a plan that will only push salmon further toward extinction, will damage fishing communities, and undermine a central pillar of Idaho's heritage.

Todd True, one of the attorneys for the fishing and conservation groups in the litigation, said, the government has failed completely to use the last four months of review for a serious, substantive, or cooperative effort to build a revised plan that follows the law and science, and leads to salmon recovery.

"Instead of the actions these fish need, they are offering a plan for more planning, and a study for more studying," True said. "Nowhere is this more apparent than in their treatment of major changes to the dams and river operations, which are among the most critical issues for salmon survival and recovery. We look forward to explaining to the court just how little this latest effort accomplishes. We can do much better, but not by trying to avoid the problems facing wild salmon in the Columbia and Snake rivers."

Conservation and sport fishing groups hoped for true collaborative discussions that would chart a clear and measurable course toward recovery of wild salmon and steelhead stocks. The administration, however, failed to convene any substantive dialogue with the plaintiffs, and instead embraced the status quo, two decades of politically driven science that fail to meet the basic tenets of the Endangered Species Act.

"Rather than taking the bull by the horns and helping Northwest people decide this issue once and for all, this administration showed a serious lack of leadership," Stuart said. "The continued uncertainty that this decision perpetuates is bad for the Northwest, will delay progress, and does little to create recovery of wild salmon and steelhead."

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