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Klamath dam pact bodes well for Idaho salmon solution

BOISE — A Thursday announcement by Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne demonstrates that people of different stripes can come together to resolve differences and find solutions for restoring Idaho's imperiled salmon and steelhead populations.

The Kempthorne announcement — that the Bush administration has put its weight behind a preliminary agreement to remove four dams on the Klamath River in Oregon and California to restore salmon runs — marks a dramatic shift from a previously unflinching posture on dam removal.

"We're encouraged. The Klamath deal shows the scale of things that can get done when people sit down to work out differences," said Bill Sedivy, executive director at Idaho Rives United (IRU). "We have the same sorts of issues to deal with in the Snake River Basin as folks faced in the Klamath Basin, plus a few more.

"But if folks can reach consensus in the Klamath Basin, we should be able to reach consensus here in the Columbia and Snake Basin."

If finalized, the Klamath project would cost hundreds of millions and be the largest dam removal and river restoration effort in the world's history — thus far.

As is the case with the four dams on the lower Snake River, the dams on the Klamath provide hydroelectric power, affect the ability of farmers to irrigate crops and block migration corridors for salmon.

Sedivy said IRU recognizes that farms need water, that Northwest residents need electricity and that state, federal and tribal interests must all be involved in building salmon solutions.

"The only way to get from here to there is for everyone involved to sit down and hammer out real, practical solutions that work for people as much as they work for fish," Sedivy said. "At the same time, everyone involved must realize that the government has certain legal and moral obligations to do what it takes to restore salmon and steelhead."

— please see other side —

Political shifts in this month's election combined with the Klamath decision give salmon advocates additional hope.

Idaho Senator-elect Jim Risch, a Republican, and Oregon Senator-elect Jeff Merkley, a Democrat, have both advanced a willingness to seek solutions to ailing salmon populations. So has Idaho's new 1st District Democratic Congressman Walt Minnick.

IRU is part of a broad consortium of salmon interests that believe removal of four lower Snake River dams is the only sure way to restore Idaho's salmon. But leaders of the group also believe that sitting down with a broad spectrum of interest groups is the only way to achieve solutions that will work.

Meanwhile, U.S. District Judge James Redden is expected to rule early in 2009 on whether the Bush Administration's third try at a Columbia/Snake salmon recovery plan is lawful. If he finds it illegal, he may then decide to impose a permanent injunction on river operations until a legal plan is in place.

The judge has said he would impart "serious consequences" if the plan is again illegal.

Therefore, it is prudent, Sedivy said, for Northwest leaders to prepare now for court action that could require real change in salmon policy. Those preparations should include a willingness to sit down and talk.

"All of these factors make the timing right for launching meaningful dialogue," Sedivy said. "Now is as good a setting as we've had for collaborative work."

Snake River sockeye salmon were listed as endangered in 1991, while chinook and steelhead were listed as threatened in 1992 and 1997 respectively. For tens of thousands of years these fish were a cornerstone of Idaho's natural world.

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Idaho Rivers United is a statewide river conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring Idaho's rivers. For more information, please contact Bill Sedivy at (208) 343-7481 or visit www.idahorivers.org.