



March 24, 2010

Independent Scientific Advisory Board (ISAB)  
c/o Erik Merrill  
Northwest Power & Conservation Council  
851 SW 6th Avenue, Suite 1100  
Portland, Oregon 97204-1348

Dear Mr. Merrill:

The Independent Science Advisory Board's (ISAB) current review of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) proposed decision on transport and spill during May is of critical importance to the listed salmon and steelhead stocks it will directly affect as well as the regional interests represented by Northwest RiverPartners (NWRP). We greatly appreciate the ISAB's views and hope these comments are useful to you in your deliberations on this most important issue.

Northwest RiverPartners is a nonprofit, non-partisan alliance of river interests joined together to promote salmon conservation policies founded in sound science. Our members rely on the Columbia and Snake River systems for energy, recreation, irrigation, and commerce as well as fish and wildlife benefits. Our members and northwest families and businesses ultimately end up paying for much of the cost of the region's fish and wildlife efforts, currently estimated at \$750 – 900 million annually. This is the largest investment in endangered and threatened species anywhere in the country.

We do not shrink from this, but we do expect these funds to be well spent, meaning fish and wildlife decisions that are based on the best available science and represent the most cost-effective way to achieve salmon recovery goals. We hold this current NOAA decision on how to maximize salmon and steelhead survival during this poor water year to these same standards.

In this regard the ISAB's review of the scientific foundation underlying NOAA's proposed decision is critically important. The region has for decades operated with the understanding that poor water years brought low flows, higher in-river temperatures and increased levels of predation. All these factors hurt salmon survivals. For these reasons, the rule governing federal hydro system operations has been to maximize transportation from the three Snake River collector dams in poor water years as the best way to protect

fish and maximize their survival. This strategy was consistently applied until 2007 when a court-ordered litigation strategy mandated a hydro system operation that included spill in April and May.

We are now facing another really low water year. Based on NOAA's extensive, twenty year record of research into the effects of transportation on fish survival, the issue appears straightforward. Yet, the ISAB received two presentations at the public meeting on March 12 that suggested that some level of spill should be considered in May as an "experiment" even in really poor water years and despite a wealth of data to the contrary. It is astonishing that some interests continue to advocate spill even if it means leaving fish in low-flow conditions which significantly and adversely affects adult survivals!

NOAA's analysis appears to be very extensive and to be the best information available. For example, NOAA's slide entitled "# of Adults Returning" showed that using observed Smolt to Adult Returns (SARs) from 2007 (a water year similar to this year) the number of adult steelhead that are expected to return from NOAA's proposed operation would be 92,900 fish. If NOAA were to decide to spill in May, that number would decline by about half to 46,600 returning fish.

We understand that other factors, such as ocean conditions, make it impossible to predict adult returns, even for this year, but it is significant that this single decision on whether to spill in May of this year has the potential to kill half of the returning steelhead in the Snake River. This one calculation makes NOAA's motivation under the Endangered Species Act crystal clear. No other action that we have observed has the potential to save or kill half of any listed population. In fact, the region has been spending hundreds of millions improving dam passage to achieve survival improvements of a few percent.

The issue before the ISAB is to confirm whether or not NOAA's analysis is based on the best available scientific information. The point is not to engage in an experiment that puts half a listed species adult returns at risk. The ISAB's charge, as in all your reviews, is to help the region's decision-makers determine if the best available science has been brought to bear.

You have heard suggestions that we should give spill in a poor water year one more try. This recommendation is not based on science, but rather on a different agenda that appears to be driven by policy and litigation objectives that have the consequence of passing over risks to ESA protected species. It is easy for some entities or individuals to make recommendations for actions for which they will not be held accountable. In this case, it is ultimately NOAA and the Corps of Engineers that will and should be held accountable for this decision.

NWRP appreciates the ISAB's review and thoughtful deliberation on the transport/spill decision before NOAA. This decision will have dramatic consequences not only on future returns of steelhead and other listed species, but will also directly affect the US v Oregon harvest levels for steelhead and fall Chinook that are based on returning adults. While the ultimate decision continues to rest with NOAA and the Corps by law, your

scientific review will help NOAA to determine if their scientific foundation for this decision is the best one available and will have a large impact on how NOAA chooses to proceed with this year's operations.

Thank you for considering our comments. If you have any questions, or would like to discuss any aspect of these comments, please don't hesitate to call me at (503) 274-7792 or (503) 367-9997.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Terry Flores". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Terry Flores, Executive Director

Cc: NOAA Fisheries  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
Bonneville Power Administration  
NW Power and Conservation Council  
Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission  
Northwest RiverPartners Board of Directors