

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HJM 4036

As Reported By House Committee On:
Natural Resources

Brief Description: Urging Congress to not breach dams.

Sponsors: Representatives Grant, Mastin, Hankins, Schoesler, Sheahan, Linville, Robertson, Buck, Delvin and Ogden.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 2/3/98, 2/5/98 [DP].

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Buck, Chairman; Sump, Vice Chairman; Thompson, Vice Chairman; Alexander; Chandler; Hatfield and Pennington.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Regala, Ranking Minority Member; Butler, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; and Anderson.

Staff: Carole Richmond (786-7114).

Background: The Snake River sockeye and other salmon runs on the Columbia and Snake Rivers have been listed as threatened or endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Under the ESA, agencies of the federal government are required to not jeopardize the existence of listed species. Over the past several years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in consultation with other federal agencies, tribal governments and the affected states, has been considering various proposals to improve flows of water for salmon. These proposals include drawing down the river level to approximate natural flows on certain stretches of the Snake and Columbia Rivers.

One of the alternatives is to "breach" the four dams on the Snake River, which control the river between Lewiston, Idaho, and the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers. "Breaching" means removing the earthen portion of the dam on the sides, while leaving the concrete structure intact. This would create channels around the dams. The effect of breaching would be to return the river to a more natural state to improve fish passage and to largely eliminate the purposes for which the dams were constructed. Hydropower production, navigation, and irrigation would be drastically changed or eliminated.

Summary of Bill: The President and Congress of the United States are petitioned to reject any proposals that involve breaching of any dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. The petition invokes the effect that breaching of the dams would have on power production, the economies of river-dependent cities and ports, and the fact that restoration of salmon runs will require comprehensive solutions that include all parties.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Testimony For: River barging is more fuel efficient than the alternatives. If this proposal became reality, not only towns would be affected, but the entire region. Many other proposals are being analyzed to help salmon. Many efforts would be less harmful to the local economies. Barging is the only means of transport. The message that needs to be sent is: this is not a solution. Breaching the dams would turn the clock back 50 years. There are many reasons other than dams for why the fish are not coming back.

Testimony Against: Recovering wild salmon requires a move back to more natural conditions. In the life of every dam, there's a choice at some point: modify it, retain it, or remove it. Idaho has been looking at salmon recovery and has determined that dam removal is desirable. The things we're doing right now are not working. We have to look at the alternatives.

Testified: Representative Bill Grant, prime sponsor; Senator Valoria Loveland; Mack Funk, Port of Clarkston (all in favor); and Tim Stearns, Save Our Wild Salmon (against).