ANALYSIS OF HJM 4010

House Agriculture & Ecology Committee ***February 15, 1999***

-Requests the federal government not to consider breaching dams on the main stem of the Columbia or Snake Rivers as a productive option for enhancing anadromous fish stocks.

BACKGROUND:

With certain exceptions, if a species has been listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, each federal agency must ensure that its actions will not likely jeopardize the continued existence of the species or will not result in the destruction or adverse modification of its habitat. Such an agency action is an action authorized, funded, or carried out by the agency. (16 U.S.C. Sec. 1536(a)(2).) It includes an action granting a permit or license. (50 C.F.R. Sec. 402.02.) With certain exceptions, no person may take an endangered species of fish or wildlife or violate certain rules of the Secretary of the Interior or Secretary of Commerce regarding them. However, a person may incidentally take such a species if an incidental take permit has been issued. The latter requires the approval of a habitat conservation plan. (16 U.S.C. Sec. 1538 and 1539.)

Steelhead have been listed as threatened or endangered and Bull Trout have been listed as threatened for various portions of the Columbia River. Sockeye have been listed as endangered and spring/summer Chinook, fall Chinook, Steelhead and Bull Trout have been listed as threatened for the Snake River. The status of several stocks of salmonids is being reviewed for potential additional listings under the Endangered Species Act.

In 1995, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers published a final environmental impact statement (EIS) containing the results of a five-year system operation review for the operation of the Columbia/Snake River system. As part of that review, the Corps' examined the environmental impacts and benefits of various operational strategies and examined at a reconnaissance level the estimated costs of a number of operational configurations for the lower Snake River. One, called the Permanent Natural River Operation– option, would involve lowering the reservoirs on the four lower Snake River dams to nearly original riverbed levels year-round and lowering the reservoir at the John Day Dam on the main stem of the Columbia River. Economic reviews of alternatives have continued since the publication of the EIS. The current federal budget provides funds for phase I of a John Day Reservoir drawdown study and for continuing the lower Snake River feasibility study and construction activity.

SUMMARY:

The importance of federally owned and federally licensed dams on the Snake and Columbia Rivers for energy production and transportation is described. Certain findings of a 1995 study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding a natural river option for the lower Snake River are listed, including costs of the option and its comparison to fish transportation options for juvenile fish survival.

The federal government is asked to acknowledge that:

- breaching dams on the main stem of the Columbia or Snake rivers or operating these dams under a natural river operating system would not be more effective than other options for enhancing anadromous fish runs; and
- these other options can be implemented without the staggering costs to the region caused by the dam breaching.

The federal government is asked not to consider breaching these dams as a productive option for enhancing anadromous fish stocks.

Prepared for the House Agriculture and Ecology Committee
by Ken Hirst (786-7105) and Bill Lynch (786-7092)
Office of Program Research