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### MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Council Members

**FROM:** John Shurts

**SUBJECT:** Action agencies' proposals regarding mainstem operations in 2003

At the Council's November meeting, representatives from the Federal Columbia River Power System action agencies introduced a proposed set of changes to hydrosystem operations for 2003 and to system configuration schedules that they are asking the region to consider. The December meeting in Portland includes time on the agenda for the Council to discuss how it might respond to these proposals, and what additional information the Council will need to be able to respond.

#### List of changes proposed

##### 2003 Operations

The Federal Columbia River Power System action agencies (Bonneville, the Corps and Reclamation) have asked the region to consider a set of changes to hydro *operations* for 2003:

- eliminate spill for the March Spring Creek Hatchery release
- eliminate spring daytime spill at John Day, pending review of daytime spill test data
- test alternative spring nighttime spill levels at John Day below the BiOp level of 60% of the flow
- evaluate spill levels at Ice Harbor both spring and summer to optimize tailrace egress and project passage survival
- explore chum operation as priority over meeting the April 10 flood control rule curve in some water conditions

The action agencies estimate that these changes could save \$15-20 million per year beginning in 2003, while also, in their view, increasing salmon survival in some instances and not adversely affecting survival in others. For example, the Bonneville representatives reported to the Council staff that study results especially from 2000 and 2002 indicate, in the view of the action agencies, that a reduction in spring nighttime spill levels at John Day could increase migration survival, and that the results also indicate that daytime spill at John Day is not providing a significant survival benefit. The 2002 information for John Day was not available last month; the Corps will be providing that to the Council.

As another example, it is the view of the Bonneville representatives that study results indicate that spill survival at Bonneville Dam for the March Spring Creek Hatchery release is not

materially greater than turbine survival at the dam for the same fish, and so the same level of production and release and survival as in the past can occur even if spill is eliminated. But others have linked the elimination of spill for this release with a reprogramming of production and release from the hatchery. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is apparently reviewing the information, with others. This is a point that we will need to clarify over the next couple of months. And regarding the chum operation, we will need additional information about which water conditions might trigger this shift in priorities on a planning basis and why, how far below the April 10 target the reservoirs might be drafted, and what are the biological tradeoffs involved.

### Acceleration of configuration changes

The agencies have also asked for an acceleration in the schedules for the installation of certain system *configuration* changes, including:

- Ice Harbor -- accelerate schedule for 2005 installation of removable spillway weir and guidance system; then modify spill
- Lower Monumental -- accelerate schedule for 2006 installation of removable spillway weir and guidance system; then modify spill
- The Dalles -- accelerate schedule for 2005 installation of forebay physical guidance device; then modify spill

These changes could allow for less spill, with an estimated cost savings of another \$15-20 million per year. These proposals for acceleration are predicated largely on the encouraging results seen last year with the RSW prototype at Lower Granite. What is unclear at this point is what would be the implication or downside of accelerating the installation schedules for these items -- prioritizing the Corps budget to accelerate these items should mean other configuration changes or evaluations will drop off the schedule. The effect may not be great in 2003, as acceleration in 2003 apparently would mean only some additional evaluations that are not too expensive, which even might be accommodated without affecting other projects. But the effects may be greater in 2004 and 2005, as large construction costs are moved forward. The Corps and others will be providing information on this point in the next month or so. One further issue is that *if* we turn out to have a low runoff year in the Snake (as seems possible), the low flows in the Snake may complicate or make impossible the kinds of spill evaluations that would be optimal for going forward in 2003 with the evaluations for the RSWs at the Snake projects.

### **Process and timing for considering and deciding on these proposed changes**

The action agencies will be pursuing these proposals this winter and spring within the "Regional Forum" for considering annual and in-season operations -- TMT, SCT, IT, etc. Agency personnel have informally asked the Council to support the consideration and implementation of these proposed changes. A more formal request may come soon.

The System Configuration Team will be the focal point for consideration of the system configuration items. We have been told that the Corps would need to make a decision by the end of January of 2003 if it is going to accelerate the schedules for the system configuration items.

The Technical Management Team (TMT) will be the focal point for deciding on revisions to spill and flow levels, although study design review groups will also have an input. The spill decisions need to be made by March; better if earlier. The chum/April 10 operations issue apparently will need to be decided by February.

We asked the action agency representatives what might be the position of NMFS on these proposals. The answer has been that NMFS personnel believe the salmon survival information is such that the region should consider these proposed changes, but that they want to hear from the co-managers first before coming to a conclusion on the value of the changes.

### **Possible Council action**

As the Council is in the middle of amending the mainstem portion of its program, the Council should consider this proposal as the functional equivalent of comment on the draft amendments, and address these proposals along with all the other recommendations and comments in the final amendments. The question for the Council is whether it wants to take any *other* action in response to this proposal.

The Council could review this proposal and make a distinct decision and recommendation to the federal agencies -- separate from the program amendment process -- in support of or opposition to all or parts of the proposal. And the Council could do this all at once, or do so in pieces as the specific issues come before the Regional Forum entities. This type of decision and recommendation would be essentially a program *implementation* recommendation, like a project funding recommendation or, more precisely, akin to the Council's recommendations on 2001 operations during the drought. (It is also similar to the type of decision and recommendations the Council will be making to Bonneville on the joint customer proposal for power sales contracts, that is, a recommendation outside of formal power plan revision.) This kind of action by the Council has less pure legal meaning than a program amendment, but may carry a different kind of weight.

We will be discussing these options with the Council during the December meeting. We could even tee up part of the proposal for consideration and a Council recommendation on part of the proposal at this meeting-- whether to recommend accelerating the RSW installation schedules. However, while it would be easy to make a general statement in favor of expediting evaluation of removable spillway weirs, it is not so easy to make a recommendation on these specific proposals without knowing more about the specific implications of the changes. It is our recommendation that the Council would better serve itself by using the time at the December meeting to discuss how to address the proposals in early 2003. This would also give the Council a chance to hear from other interested entities, including the state, federal and tribal fish managers, on their views about the proposed changes. Thus our recommendation on timing for Council action is:

- December 2002 meeting -- decide on whether and how the Council wants to respond to these proposals and develop a list of information necessary to make an informed review and recommendations
- January 2003 meeting -- if the Council wants to undertake a distinct review and recommendation regarding these proposals, review and make a recommendation on (a) the proposal to accelerate the RSW and forebay device installation schedules, and (b) the proposal concerning the relative priority of the chum operation vs. the April 10 flood control target in low water conditions
- February 2003 meeting -- if the Council wants to undertake a distinct review and recommendation on these proposals, review and make a recommendation on the proposals concerning spill operations in 2003.