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October 7, 2003

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council Members

FROM: Doug Marker and Bruce Suzumoto

SUBJECT: Panel discussion on 2004 summer spill tests and mainstem implementation activities

Over the past several months, summer spill operations designed to benefit outmigrating juvenile fall chinook have been the subject of intense regional debate. The Council's mainstem amendments and regional federal executives (statement attached) have both made initiating 2004 summer spill evaluations at federal hydroprojects a high priority. To address this issue, Council staff has had discussions with federal, state and tribal representatives on how to best implement 2004 summer spill tests as well as other mainstem tasks. During the panel discussion, representatives from the federal action agencies and other parties will outline progress towards implementation of 2004 summer spill tests including possible alternatives, benefits, risks and scheduling and research constraints.

Mainstem amendment language regarding summer spill:

As a particular focus, the Council calls for NOAA Fisheries, the federal operating agencies, and salmon managers to immediately implement tests to examine the benefits of the current summer spill program for outmigrating juvenile fall chinook, and to determine whether the biological benefits can be achieved in a more effective and less costly manner. Summer spill costs are high. Using a 50-year historical water record, the Council staff estimated that the cost of bypass spill for fish during the months of July and August averages one-third of the total cost impact of all mainstem operations designed for fish and wildlife protection. While the summer spill program provides survival advantages to in-river outmigrants, the Council recommends an evaluation of the efficacy and cost of all actions available to improve juvenile and adult survival. These tests should be designed to encompass the full life cycle of fall chinook and evaluate all sources of mortality. This provision is not intended to dispute that spill is generally considered to be the safest passage route for in-river juvenile migrants, but rather to pursue more rigorous analysis and assessment of alternatives that may provide similar, or more effective, biological benefits at reduced cost.

August 26, 2003

Statement of Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration, NOAA Fisheries
Re: Continuation of Summer Spill for Fish Passage in the Columbia and Snake Rivers

The regional heads of the Corps of Engineers (General William Grisoli), Bonneville Power Administration (Steve Wright) and NOAA Fisheries (Bob Lohn) said today that spill at Federal Columbia Basin dams to aid juvenile salmon migrants will continue until Aug. 31 consistent with the planning date identified in the 2000 NOAA Fisheries Biological Opinion on operation of the Federal Columbia River Power System. But the agency heads said they believe changes must be implemented before next summer to more clearly allow alternative measures that could accomplish the biological benefit associated with spill at a reduced cost.

Currently the river system is operated consistent with a 2000 biological opinion that provides recommendations for operating the system to improve survival of salmon and steelhead listed as threatened or endangered. The opinion sets a planning date for terminating the summer spill program on August 31, although the exact date is subject to in-season management by the Technical Management Team. However, the biological opinion provides little guidance for determining when to end spill in a particular year.

The federal agency heads noted that the summer spill program, based on available evidence, appears to be excessively costly relative to the biological benefit provided. An analysis performed by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council concludes that summer spill in August is likely to result in an increase in the number of 5 adult listed Snake River fall chinook, while non-listed adult upper Columbia River fall chinook are expected to increase by approximately 2400. Estimates by some of the region's Tribes indicate potentially higher numbers of survival as a result of the spill program. Spill this year is reducing revenues for the Bonneville Power Administration by approximately \$1 million a day in August. The federal agency heads are concerned that under any of the survival estimates the costs appear exceedingly high relative to the biological benefit.

The federal agencies attempted to work with States and Tribes to identify alternative measures that would achieve similar or greater biological benefits. However, regional consensus could not be reached. Following considerable review, the federal agencies concluded there was an inadequate basis to cease spill this year at a time other than the August 31 planning date. The federal agencies determined to continue spill through August 31.

The agency heads stated their goal is to have a method in place by next year to help ensure that biological benefits are met in the most cost effective manner available. The agency heads concluded that they have a responsibility to the region to devise an approach that is less costly while maintaining the ability to achieve the biological objectives for salmon and steelhead, and will work with all interested parties in the region to accomplish this objective.