

Bill for Experimental Spill at Columbia River Dams Comes Due

Federal judge's demand for trial spilling of extra water for fish comes with \$10.2 million price tag for Pacific Northwest electricity customers.



(SHELTON, WA) -- Electric utilities throughout the Pacific Northwest, including Mason County's two Public Utility Districts, are on the hook for \$10.2 million...the cost of a federal judge's order for an experimental water spill program...at Columbia and Snake River dams.

Federal Judge Michael Simon ordered the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to conduct the spill experiment at Snake River dams April 3 to June 20. The trial was run at Columbia River dams April 10 through June 15.



The experiment was aimed at determining if sending more water through dam spillways instead of using it for power generation would help the passage of salmon in the Columbia River Basin.

"According to information from Northwest RiverPartners, the extra spill shaved only a few hours off a young salmon's migration time," said Annette Creekpau, Mason PUD 3 manager. "As we also expected, the extra spill increased dissolved gases in the river, which is a hazard for young fish," Creekpau said. "Some of the sampled salmon showed 'gas bubble trauma,' which is similar to what happens to human divers when they get the bends."

The overall cost of the additional spill was \$38.6 million. However, the Bonneville Power Administration found savings in its fish and wildlife program to reduce the impact on rates.

"We're grateful BPA was able to dig deep to find savings this year to help offset some of the costs of the added spill," said Steven Taylor, Mason PUD 1 manager. "We remain concerned that for future spill experiments, that the BPA may not be able to find cost offsets."

Locally, Mason PUD 1 and PUD 3 say their share of the extra cost of the court-ordered experiment will have to be passed along to customers. The charge will be shown as a specific line item on customer bills.

Depending on how much electricity a customer uses, between 25 and 30 percent of their monthly bill is already going to Columbia River fish and wildlife programs.

"Management of the Columbia River system for fish and hydropower is being driven by courtroom edicts, not by the fishery managers who understand the science and impacts," said Joel Myer, Mason PUD 3's public information and government relations manager. "There's a lot of concern by those who use the river for their livelihoods about the increased role of the courts in control of this mighty resource. Management of the river by appointed judges bypasses science, the experts, and may not be in the best interests of all parties."

This is a federal issue on which Mason County's PUDs and their industry partners have been working to educate federal lawmakers on the impact of added, experimental costs to customers in the region. Several members of the Pacific Northwest Congressional delegation have offered legislation (H.R. 3144) which passed the House in May, to protect ratepayers from extra payments for operation of the Columbia River hydropower system. Local customers may contact their congressmen and U.S. Senators if they have concerns.

###