

Idaho Congressman Proposes “Salmon and Energy Concept” To Breach Lower Snake River Dams

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On February 6, 2021, Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID) [proposed legislation](#) that would breach four dams on the Lower Snake River while requiring the power, transportation, and irrigation benefits of the dams to be replaced and bringing an end to long-running litigation over endangered salmon and steelhead runs. The \$34 billion plan, developed after hundreds of meetings with stakeholders, tribes, elected officials, utility companies and other interest groups, is the first time any Republican elected official has publicly supported breaching the four Lower Snake River dams and is also the first time an elected official from the interior Pacific Northwest has publicly supported dam breaching.

[Initial reactions](#) from interest groups and other elected officials suggest that Rep. Simpson’s proposal may break the decades-long political and legal logjam arising from declining salmon and steelhead runs on the Columbia-Snake system, pressure from environmental groups to breach the Lower Snake dams as a means of restoring those runs, and counter-pressure from agricultural and power interests seeking to preserve the benefits of the dams. The introduction of Rep. Simpson’s legislation may therefore represent a turning point in the debate about the Lower Snake dams, with potentially profound effects on the region’s rivers, power system, transportation system, and agricultural economy. On the other hand, senior members of the Pacific Northwest’s Republican delegation have already issued statements [opposing](#) the Simpson legislation.

Background

For several decades, controversy has swirled around four dams constructed on the Lower Snake River, the section of the river in the State of Washington between Lewiston, Idaho, and the confluence with the Columbia River at Pasco, Washington. The four dams – Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, and Lower Granite – were constructed between 1962 and 1975. As Snake River salmon and steelhead runs suffered declines over the latter decades of the twentieth century, a number of runs were listed under the Endangered Species Act. Protracted litigation ensued, in which environmental and fishing groups sought to force changes to the operation of dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers to improve fish passage and habitat. In response, the federal courts have [repeatedly rejected](#) the involved federal agencies’ biological opinions, and forced changes to operations of the federal dams.

Over the same period, environmental groups have advocated for breaching of the four dams as a solution to improving fish passage and re-opening habitat that was inundated by those dams. The dam-breaching movement [gained momentum](#) in the last few years as lack of chinook salmon, the favored prey of Salish Sea orca whales, was identified as a significant factor in limiting the populations of the whales, now listed as endangered. Proposals to breach the dams, however, have met fierce resistance from economic interests, particularly those in Eastern Washington, who benefit from the dams, which provide substantial amounts of electric power and create a transportation pathway to move large volumes of wheat and other agricultural products by barge from Lewiston, as well as significant irrigation benefits.

Key Components

Rep. Simpson's legislation attempts to reconcile these competing interests by breaching the four Lower Snake dams but replacing the economic benefits. Specific components of the legislation include:

- *Berm Removal.* The proposal recommends removing four earthen berms adjacent to the Lower Snake River's four hydroelectric dams by 2031. Berm and sediment removal is estimated to cost up to \$1.4 billion. An additional \$900 million would be allocated to a number of different funds geared towards restoration and mitigation.
- *Energy component.* The proposal recognizes that the four Lower Snake River dams and the energy they produce are valuable. To replace the lost energy, utility companies would receive up to \$10 billion "in a direct grant as firm clean power replacement" for the lost energy generation from the dams. Replacement energy generation must be completed and online by 2030, prior to breaching the earthen berms.

The proposal also recommends that the Bonneville Power Administration or another entity receive up to \$4 billion in a direct grants as "salmon spill replacement generation." This is intended to support new generation of non-carbon power to make up for lost power generation caused by spill on the Lower Snake River.

- *Transportation component.* The proposal allocates \$2.2 billion for the Snake River transportation network. This includes expanding barge transport within the Tri-Cities and Mid-Columbia Basin transportation hub, and dedicating funding to expanding the Tri-Cities ports' capacity.
- *Agriculture Concept.* If the four Lower Snake River berms are removed, the proposal notes that agriculture interests must be made partners in regional watershed improvement efforts. The proposal creates a number of funds for different watershed basins. Money from these funds would be used to enhance water quality, temperature, and quantity in the Columbia Basin.
- *Litigation moratorium.* The proposal recommends a 35-year moratorium on litigation related to anadromous fish under the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Clean Water Act for the fourteen federal Columbia River System Dams, the twelve federal projects on the Upper Snake River, and all dams within the Columbia Basin greater than 5 MW licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

- *Columbia Basin Fund*. This would be a \$33.5 billion implementation [fund](#) included in the expected national infrastructure and jobs stimulus package. The Department of Energy Special Administrator would be tasked with administering and disbursing funds. The fund would be fully funded within the first year. Money from this fund would go towards numerous different entities and efforts, such as salmon conservation, tribes, states, and local communities.
- *Tourism and recreation*. The proposal recognizes the need to fund tourism and recreation within the Lower Snake River basin. As a result, the proposal creates a Lower Snake River National Recreation Area, as well as a number of funds to support river recreation and tourism.

Broader Impacts

By redefining the terms of the debate about the Lower Snake Dams from one of salmon versus economic development to one of replacing the economic benefits of the dams, Rep. Simpson's proposal may prove to be a turning point in the future of the Columbia-Snake River system. The proposal deserves careful attention from anyone concerned about the region's future because it touches on nearly every important natural resource in the Columbia Basin, ranging from salmon and steelhead to the region's abundant carbon-free electricity, agriculture, transportation, and tourism.

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