



FISH TAGGING FORUM FINDS SOME CONSENSUS ON EFFICIENCIES BUT DIFFERENCES ON CODED WIRE TAGS

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Eighteen months of discussions -- including 15 face-to-face meetings and many more conference calls -- among subject matter experts and policy makers produced 16 consensus recommendations for how the tagging and marking of salmon and other fish from the Columbia River basin might be made more efficient and cost-effective.

A 17th recommendation failed consensus based largely on one issue in particular -- who's responsible for funding for certain research utilizing so-called coded wire tags.

"We all agree that it is important information" that has long been collected from coded wire tags, said Guy Norman, Southwest Region director for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. He and the representatives of entities that rely fish tagging and marking for research, and others that pay for it, offered remarks about recommendations from the Fish Tagging Forum that were previewed Tuesday for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council's Fish and Wildlife Committee.

"The real question is who pays for it," and what is rational allocation of the costs, Norman said.

In total last year the Bonneville Power Administration funded \$7.5 million worth of CWT projects for a variety of purposes. The federal power marketing agency spent more than \$60 million in all to support research using techniques ranging from coded wire, radio telemetry, acoustic tags and passive integrated transponder tags to genetic markers and otolith marks and scales to fin clipping and data systems to manage the information received.

(See CBB, March 1, 2013, "Columbia/Snake Basin Fish Tagging Costs \$61.4 Million In 2012; Forum Evaluates Data Value For Policy" <http://www.cbbulletin.com/425291.aspx>)

BPA funds Columbia basin fish and wildlife actions as mitigation for impacts caused by the construction and operation of particular Columbia basin dams that make up the Federal Columbia River Power System. The agency, which markets power generated in the system, also has obligations as a federal agency to assure the system does not jeopardize the survival of 13 salmon and steelhead species from the basin that are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Fish managers say that suggested reductions in CWT funding would hamper efforts aimed at hatchery mitigation for FCRPS impacts on fish stocks and answer questions important to implementation of NOAA Fisheries. biological opinion regarding strategies to boost listed fish.

Bonneville, and representatives of its customers, say some, but not all, of the coded wire work is the responsibility of the hydro system.

Of the \$60 million spent last year overall on tagging projects, \$32 million was for efforts channeled through the NPCC program. The Council makes recommendations on which projects BPA should fund.

Coded wire tag programs involves the insert of a tag in the snout of specific stocks, then sampling fisheries, hatcheries, and natural escapement for fish with CWTs. Those tags can be read with an electronic “wand” at life’s end to determine a fish’s origin.

CWT data are used in:

- hatchery management to evaluate rearing and release experiments, estimate adult production, and manage broodstock;
- harvest management (Pacific Salmon Treaty and Pacific Fishery Management Council ocean fisheries, Columbia River Fish Management Plan and U.S. v Oregon in-river commercial, sport, and tribal fisheries, and state managed fisheries in tributaries), and
- natural stock management (hatchery straying and natural spawning stock composition).

The Forum recommended unanimously spending be eliminated for “routine coded wire tagging of steelhead and sockeye because they are not sampled in the ocean at levels significant enough to influence decision making. However, some coded wire tagging of these species will be necessary for specific research projects and hatchery operations and evaluations. That recommendation would result in an estimated annual saving of up to \$500,000.”

However, the Forum could not reach a consensus recommendation on the funding responsibility for all uses, therefore four alternatives were identified for funding CWT activities.

- Alternative 1: Maintain status quo funding [\$7.5 million];
- Alternative 2: Over 3 year transition period, reduce BPA funding for fishery catch sampling and associated analysis [Eliminates \$1.9 million in annual project funding];
- Alternative 3: Over a 3 year period, reduce BPA funding for tagging at Mitchell Act Hatcheries [Funding reduction of \$0.6 million];
- Alternative 4: Increase CWT funding, if necessary, to achieve CWT program objectives (e.g., desired sampling rate at 20 percent).

BPA’s Fish and Wildlife Program director, Bill Maslen, said his agency’s funding decisions are focused on identifying any project’s “nexus” with the FCRPS – does the action help management directed at mitigating for hydro impacts?

“There is no FCRPS nexus to harvest monitoring, and fishery managers are responsible for managing harvest, which is dependent on catch sampling and analysis,” according to a BPA statement. The federal agency also has the opinion that Mitchell Act tagging should be the responsibility of NOAA Fisheries, which allocates funding for those hatcheries that comes through congressional appropriations.

Maslen said BPA had not yet made a final decision but it favored alternatives 2 and 3. Savings there would allow the redirection of those funds to on-the-ground projects “that are clearly our responsibility.”

Therese Hampton, speaking for Northwest River Partners, said the coalition of power users support the use of CWTs for projects that have that appropriate FCRPS nexus. But said the sampling and Mitchell Act CWT programs do not.

“Harvest is its own human impact” unrelated to the FCRPS, she said. Hampton, who chaired the Forum, said that fish and wildlife costs now make up 30 percent of the rate power customers pay.

“We’re just recommending that someone else has responsibility for funding it,” she said of the harvest sampling and Mitchell Act work.

State and tribal fish managers supported the CWT recommendations, except for the funding reductions outline in alternatives 2 and 3. They said such reductions would hamper efforts to mitigate for fish losses and provide data that would help assess BiOp projects.

“The ODFW agrees with Alternatives 1 and 4 that will continue or increase CWT funding to achieve CWT program sampling rates of 20 percent,” the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Tom Rein said.

“The ODFW does not agree with Alternatives 2 or 3 under this recommendation. Alternatives 2 and 3 are inconsistent with the NPCC Fish and Wildlife Program, the FCRPS BiOp, and with hatchery management plans. Alternatives 2 and 3 would dismantle existing infrastructure for current mark-sampling programs and for current hatchery effectiveness monitoring,” according a statement submitted to the Fish and Wildlife Committee by Rien, ODFW’s Columbia River Coordination Program manager.

Norman said that the WDFW supported most of the Forum’s recommendations, but opposed funding cuts that would strip important programs without other sources in sight. He also said the two programs serve both ESA and FCRPS purposes.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission – representing the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs and Yakama tribes – also objects to alternatives 2 and 3.

“Coded-wire tagging at Mitchell Act hatcheries provides critical information to evaluate hatchery performance and determine whether mitigation goals are being met,” according to a CRITFC statement. “Mitchell Act hatcheries were constructed, in part, to mitigate for the dam-related mortalities associated with the construction of the Federal Columbia River Hydro-Power system, and the Fish and Wildlife program therefore has an obligation to help evaluate their effectiveness as required under the FCRPS BiOp.”

NOAA Fisheries Elizabeth Gaar, in an e-mail, advised the Council to go slow.

“In both cases, our recommendation is that the Council proceed cautiously and only after developing a full understanding of the potential effects of these program reductions.

“The overarching effect of these recommendations is that either a different entity would need to pay for the programs or the programs would be reduced as proposed,” said Gaar, a NOAA Fisheries senior policy adviser.

“The proposed reductions could affect all three legs of the coded wire tag program, which includes tagging at particular programs; coded wire sampling for commercial and recreational fisheries; and data base infrastructure.

“One of the unknowns about the proposed reductions is if and how the programs would be backfilled and the associated future effects of various reprogramming options. For example, it may be that hatchery fish release levels would be reduced to maintain necessary tagging. It is

less clear how the more substantial reductions in the sampling and infrastructure programs would be replaced. We believe that the full consequences of the recommendations should be understood before proceeding,” the NOAA e-mail said.

The Forum recommendation noted that CWTs are used to answer multiple management questions considered its process, “in particular harvest and hatchery management (see Attachment 2, 5 and indicator analysis spreadsheet.). The CWT system (tagging, sampling and database) is the only tagging methodology under current sampling programs to distinguish fishery mortality from natural mortality in the ocean, and to provide age and stock specific ocean and Columbia River Basin exploitation rates that are required to calculate overall survival and productivity. The Forum evaluated the current use of CWT to determine where efficiencies might be gained.”

The Fish Tagging Forum was chartered by the Council in July 2011 to evaluate the fish tagging activities and their cost-effectiveness and program effectiveness. Many of the fish tagging project proposals are recommended for funding through the NPCC’s Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program. It was also asked to review issues identified in the March 2009 Independent Scientific Advisory Board/Independent Scientific Review Panel report regarding fish tagging technologies and programs.

Participating in the Forum were representatives of such entities as BPA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, NOAA Fisheries, the Council, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, tribes, the Public Power Council, Northwest RiverPartners, Mid-Columbia public utility districts, consultants, universities, and other interested parties.

For information and documents related to the Fish Tagging Forum go to <http://www.nwcouncil.org/fw/tag/home/>

