



NORTHWEST POWER/CONSERVATION COUNCIL RECOMMENDS CONTINUED BPA FUNDING FOR CODED WIRE TAGGING

Posted on Friday, August 09, 2013 (PST)

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council on Wednesday voted 6-2 to recommend that the Bonneville Power Administration continue its full contribution – about \$7.5 million annually – to a program aimed at monitoring the fate of Columbia River salmon via coded wire tag technology.

The vote had Idaho Council members Bill Booth and Jim Yost siding with power user organizations, who have argued that CWT program goals do not have a specific “nexus” or connection with Bonneville’s legal funding obligations.

The federal entity markets power generated at Columbia and Snake river basin dams that are part of the Federal Columbia River Power System, and is charged by the Northwest Power Act with mitigating for impacts to fish and wildlife stemming from hydro system existence and operations. BPA also has obligations under the Endangered Species Act to avoid jeopardizing listed stocks – 13 Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead species in particular – affected by the hydro system.

The current CWT program is about \$21.2 million, with the BPA cost share being about \$7.5 million or approximately 35 percent of the total.

The federal power marketing agency in fiscal year 2012 spent more than \$60 million overall 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.

The status quo funding recommendation to BPA, which urges continued funding at current levels, drew two yes votes apiece from Montana, Oregon and Washington appointees to the Council.

It was one of four alternatives proposed for addressing the CWT issue by the Fish Tagging Forum, which was chartered by the Council in July 2011 to evaluate the fish tagging activities and their cost-effectiveness and program effectiveness. The forum included representatives of federal, state and tribal fish management entities as well as power user groups.

The other three alternatives included:

- Reducing over a three-year period BPA funding for fishery catch sampling and associated analysis, which would eliminate about \$1.9 million in annual project funding.
- reducing over a three-year period BPA funding for tagging at hatcheries funded through the federal Mitchell Act, a reduction of \$600,000.
- Increase CWT funding, if necessary, to achieve CWT program objectives (e.g., desired sampling rate at 20 percent).

Terry Flores, Northwest RiverPartners executive director, told the Council Wednesday that her organization's members did not believe the CWT program had a clear nexus – did not provide information that was of direct benefit to management aimed at mitigating for hydro system effects.

She and Public Power Council policy analysis Bo Downen said their organizations favored alternatives 2 and 3, which would transition portions of the funding away from BPA and the ratepayers to other parties, such as states and NOAA Fisheries, which allocates Mitchell Act funding appropriated by Congress.

Washington Council members Phil Rockefeller and Tom Karier said that the CWT does more than benefit harvest and hatchery management.

"In order to evaluate a major mitigation expenditure you have to evaluate harvest," Karier said. That major expenditure -- for hatcheries to provide fish to mitigate for losses caused by the hydro system -- is BPA's second largest fish and wildlife funding category.

"There's a lot of reasons to know what happens to these fish," Karier said. That includes impacts of hatchery fish on returning naturally produced salmon and steelhead that are ESA listed.

Booth said he could not support the status quo alternative. In a statement dated Aug. 7, he and Yost commended the work of the Tagging Forum, and suggested that the panel's report and recommendations – most of which were made unanimously – should provide a foundation for a Bonneville reconsideration of what parts of the Columbia Basin's tagging program it should pay for.

"Because of their methodical and detailed work, the Council, the region and the Bonneville Power Administration now have a much clearer picture of both the diverse functions served by a multitude of coded wire tagging projects, and the costs associated with the Columbia Basin's \$35,700,000 fish tagging effort," the Idaho statement says.

"As it reviews FCRPS nexus relating to its tagging projects, we believe BPA should follow the directives of the NW Power Act... wherein the Administrator is directed to protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife to the extent affected by the development and operation of any hydroelectric project on the Columbia River and its tributaries in a manner consistent with the program adopted by the Council and the purposes of the Act," the Idaho statement says.

"Importantly, the Administrator is further directed to ensure that such expenditures shall be in addition to, not in lieu of, other expenditures authorized or required from other entities under other agreements or provisions of law.

"In view of the above mandate, and because Section 4(h)(10)(A) is a direction to the BPA Administrator, it is our opinion that BPA should; (1) carefully review the record and findings of the Council's Fish Tagging Forum, (2) determine where any of the tagging efforts are inconsistent with the provisions of the NW Power Act, and (3) phase out funding for projects that lack an FCRPS nexus or are in lieu of funds that should have been provided by other entities, such as Mitchell Act Hatchery fish tagging and other harvest management tagging."

Bonneville, which will make the final contracting decisions, has long held the opinion that at least some of its funding for the CWT program is misplaced -- funding research functions that fail to show that nexus, or are in lieu, which the Power Act says BPA should avoid.

“We’re continuing to talk” with the Council and staff and various stakeholders, said BPA’s Fish and Wildlife Program director, Bill Maslen. “We want to be respectful to the process and the Council. BPA would rather divert funds away from projects without that clear nexus to the hydro system and with in lieu issues and toward fish and wildlife work that is clearly the power system’s responsibility.

“We plan to continue to fund coded wire tag work we see as having a direct nexus,” Maslen said, such as tagging in tributaries and at hatcheries funded through the BPA/NPCC program.

The insights produced through 18 months of discussions in the Tagging Forum should help heighten those discussions on the CWT program and other tagging efficiency issues, Maslen said.

In making its recommendation to Bonneville, the Council and its Fish and Wildlife Committee offered nine “principles and recommendations” to consider in making CWT funding decisions.

The first says that the “Council concludes that the use of Bonneville funds for CWT is not obviously outside Bonneville’s spending authority under the Northwest Power Act, nor is it a clear violation of the ‘in lieu’ provisions of the Act.

“Rather, in a situation of overlapping authorities, the question is whether the level of Bonneville funding for coded wire tagging is out of proportion with what could be considered Bonneville’s ‘fair share’ of the coded wire tagging program, based on the amount of information gleaned from the tags that is relevant to the Council’s program. This is a policy within the purview of the Council as well as Bonneville.”

“Encouraging efficiency in existing tagging programs and reducing costs in favor of more efficient tagging methods is a goal endorsed by the Council and recommended to Bonneville.”

For more information on fish tagging, see:

-- CBB, June 21, 2013, “Economists: Need For ‘Rationalization’ Of Basin Fish-Tagging Programs Spending \$70 Million A Year” <http://www.cbbulletin.com/427144.aspx>

-- CBB, May 10, 2013, “Fish Tagging Forum Finds Some Consensus On Efficiencies But Differences On Coded Wire Tags” <http://www.cbbulletin.com/426530.aspx>

-- 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>

