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## NW Fishletter #333, June 5, 2014

### [4] Some CWT Funding Realigned After State Talks

More than two years after customer groups and others called for BPA to reduce its annual spending on Columbia Basin fish tagging programs, the power marketing agency is still working on it.

To date, Bonneville has managed to redirect about 20 percent of more than \$2 million it planned to move last winter to more "on-the-ground" projects, out of the \$7.1 million it spends annually to support coded-wire tag (CWT) programs in the Columbia Basin.

Pushing back against this was intense pressure to maintain the status quo funding. This included a full-court press by a CWT-industry lobbyist that marshaled support from Northwest politicians who **questioned** BPA's proposed shift in funding.

An agreement with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife was quietly negotiated in January. It called for BPA to remain committed to spending \$2.3 million annually for Federal Columbia River Power System mitigation that is now spent for fish sampling and Mitchell Act CWT programs downstream of Bonneville Dam (\$1.2 million each for Washington and Oregon), but \$171,000 would be realigned in FY 2014.

BPA and WDFW pledged to collaborate over any future funding realignment of the CWT program beyond 2014, "to ensure the full program is supported in a way that is mutually agreeable."

However, the deal contains a "backstop" that says both entities intended that there be no net loss of CWT functions in the lower Columbia currently funded by BPA.

If circumstances change and existing CWT functions by BPA are not maintained, then they will work together on a solution. As a last resort, BPA is committed to maintaining current funding levels if the realignment funding sources are lowered. Washington also committed to continue supporting the hydro BiOp.

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A one-year contract has also been reached with the state of Oregon that redirects about \$171,000 in CWT funding to other projects. No memorandum of understanding has been completed spelling out future collaboration over the issue, as with Washington, said Bill Maslen, director of BPA's integrated F&W program. Maslen said another \$100,000 in CWT funding for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will also be redirected, so in all, about 20 percent of the \$2 million-plus Bonneville plans to eventually be redirected.

The redirected funding is slated to augment spending for irrigation screen projects in both states. Maslen said more discussion will take place to redirect even more CWT funding in 2015 and 2016.

This process began when BPA customer groups and others had questioned why BPA spent millions on coded-wire tags--\$7 million in 2012 alone--when it didn't seem to be an expenditure tied directly to the hydro system. Rather, the CWT program is used by harvest managers from Alaska to California to estimate exploitation rates on different stocks in various salmon fisheries.

A forum was established under the aegis of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council that collected information on all tagging efforts. When monitoring and evaluation costs were included, it all added up to \$58 million in 2012, according to BPA.

PIT tags (which use passive inductive transponders) accounted for most of the costs, with \$24.5 million spent in 2012. These tiny tags are used by the tens of thousands in various efforts to estimate juvenile survival through the hydro system, and adult survival when the fish return.

Acoustic tags are used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to estimate performance standards at hydro projects as part of the hydro BiOp. These tags are the most expensive, but are only useful for a few weeks. Acoustic-tag costs added up to \$18 million in 2012, but that was expected to drop significantly in the future.

Then there is the \$7 million that went to the CWT program, another \$5.6 million or so for genetic tags, \$1.8 million for radio tags, and \$1.2 million for other kinds.

The fish tagging forum had developed several possible alternatives for future CWT funding, including maintaining the status quo. These included reducing BPA's costs by about \$1.9 million annually over three years; cutting BPA's funding over a three-year period for tagging at Mitchell Act hatcheries to save about \$600,000,

or actually increasing CWT funding to achieve a desired sampling rate in fisheries.

Last August, the NWCC voted 6-2 to keep most current tagging programs in place, including BPA's \$7.5 million annual contribution to the CWT program. Only Idaho's two members dissented.

Back in May 2013, BPA issued a position paper on CWT funding that gave the region notice it was prepared to shift some funding to other areas. The agency said there was no FCRPS "nexus" to harvest monitoring, and that "fishery managers are responsible for managing harvest, which is dependent on catch sampling and analysis."

Though BPA had funded these efforts for years, the agency said the tagging and monitoring effort off the Oregon coast and in the lower Columbia posed an "in lieu" issue under the Power Act, which says, "expenditures shall be in addition to, not in lieu of, other expenditures authorized or required from other entities." As far as Mitchell Act hatcheries are concerned, BPA said it could not assume a funding responsibility where it does not have a legal repayment responsibility.

In December, Maslen said his agency would redirect some of the CWT funding because it provided a better "nexus" for Bonneville's F&W spending, and was not about cost-cutting. At the time, Maslen told *NW Fishletter* that BPA had not really rejected the Council's recommendation. "Rather, we are working toward a final decision with project sponsors, in coordination with the Council, to realign funding in a manner that is mutually agreeable to address BPA concerns about FCRPS nexus," he said by email.

The fish tagging analysis had even included a review by the region's independent economic board, which had developed a preliminary model to track costs and benefits. The model also estimated costs for increasing CWT recovery by one tag.

For fall Chinook tagged in the lower Columbia and caught in the Oregon coastal fishery, it was estimated at \$2,378; for a spring/summer Chinook tagged in the Methow River and caught off the Washington coast, it amounted to \$3,682. But it would only cost \$335 for one more recovery in the Alaska fishery.

The economists said the big discrepancy in costs was likely due to the large sampling effort needed in certain fisheries, where some CWT stocks have such low prevalence. **-B. R.**

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